

Can we have a robust public debate on biodiversity offsetting?

Biodiversity offsetting promises to be Britain's next big environmental battle. Can we have the necessarily robust debate?

June 03, 2014



An elephant calf at

Whipsnade Zoo, November last year. Today and tomorrow, scientists are meeting at London Zoo to discuss biodiversity offsetting. Photograph: Tony Margiocchi/Barcroft Media

Today and tomorrow, London Zoo hosts [the first global conference on biodiversity offsetting](#). It's co-hosted by Defra, who seem [keen to implement the approach](#) in the UK, possibly as a way of speeding up the planning process. In response to this conference at the zoo, a group of NGOs and academics held [a sort of counter-workshop](#) in Regents Park last night.

The central idea of biodiversity offsetting is compensation for works which are environmentally damaging but, for various reasons, we still want to undertake. For example, you might want to build houses in Essex; it would disrupt lizard habitat, but there are strong social and political reasons for this work, so it's decided that another field a few miles away will be protected, with the lizards moved there. It assumes all sorts of things - not least that the lizards won't mind - but is seen by some as an useful way through the various compromises of modernity.

The very existence of workshops held in protest alongside scientific conferences is interesting in itself. There's something appealing about the idea of conferences having a 'fringe' - like a festival fringe - where the more tightly official peer reviewed content can be disputed, played around with or even parodied outside the formal structures. I think it could help draw public attention to the important conversations that happen at conferences, and do so without being controlled by the scientific community (and their chosen partners) itself. I'd like to see more of this sort of thing.

Arguably, this issue of biodiversity offsetting is a topic that is in particular need of this sort of public debate. The idea of a way to open up more spaces to build on is appealing, but biodiversity loss is also something to be worried about. A New Internationalist piece trailed the counter-workshop with '[Britain's next big environmental battle](#)' but that's perhaps optimistic. A more likely outcome is government quite dramatically changing policy with little debate and everyone just crossing their fingers and hoping for the best.

The drama and key intellectual dispute at the centre of the counter-workshop was around whether biodiversity offsetting is always wrong, or if it's possible to do well. We've seen this sort of fight before - you might have read [George Monbiot on the topic recently](#), or [some of the responses](#) - and if we do manage to build a larger public debate on the topic, we'll no doubt see it again.

As [Morgan Robertson](#), a political ecologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told the counter-workshop, the US has had market-based environment policy since the 1970s. Robertson described it as a bit of a fudge; the [Clean Water Act](#) had initially been designed to ensure projects were taken the least environmentally damaging way, but people kept taking environmentally damaging options regardless, and instead of taking this as a defeat, a language and system of 'compensation' grew, leading to what today is a multimillion-dollar industry.

Robertson spoke quite inspiringly from the perspective of an ecologist already working within a problematic system of biodiversity offsetting, suggesting that the UK should see Defra's push towards biodiversity offsetting less as a crisis, and more as a rare opportunity.

He started from the key point that "You get what you measure in offsetting, and usually you are measuring the wrong thing." This reflects the very complex nature of the exercise, and how many assumptions are folded into it. He compared biodiversity offsetting with carbon offsetting, and pointed out that at least we generally agree what carbon is, even if there is still a lot contested around it. It's hard to get a room full of chemists to disagree about the ideal gas law, but it's easy to get a room full of herpetologists to disagree about what constitutes a lizard habitat. And that's before we get on to the many other species that have a relationship to that space (including humans). But, Robertson concluded, we have a chance to fight what we measure with Defra; we should "seize this moment of measurement" and ensure we don't measure the wrong things. This could be a way to ensure both science and otherwise marginalised voices in environmental policy are listened to.

I liked Robertson's optimism, but I left the meeting still quite unsure. There is some necessarily assumption that we know what is important when we do these sorts of calculations. If we'd taken a scientific risk assessment in the dawn of the industrial revolution, we wouldn't have measured for CO₂. The basic idea of biodiversity offsetting seems to deny the role of nature to surprise us. There's something that feels deeply unscientific about that.

Moreover, I don't think I trust Defra to run a robust enough public debate on this this topic. I wish I could, but I don't. In the second half of the workshop, we heard from Ian Scoones on his work exploring [the political ecologies of carbon in Africa](#). Watching the growth in a market for carbon, Scoones and his colleagues have seen various contestations over power and values and rights over spaces. Some people do lose out, but some gain power too as new alliances are struck. The trading of carbon has provoked changes in spaces where deep inequalities and deep politics get played out - local as well as global - but this can often be a matter of inequalities being reformed and rearticulated rather than removed.

Offsetting may well open up some discussion over how we understand and value various parts of our environment, including the role of science in helping us understand it. But as Scoones noted, such debates are often closed down very quickly, in no small part because people can make a lot of money from such trading. After all, most of us would have no idea that conference at the zoo is even going on, let alone what they are talking about. I'm not sure our current systems for public engagement with science are up to the job.