

Conservationists split over 'biodiversity offsetting' plans

First global conference on market system of conservation hears of conflicting experiences in Australia and the US

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theguardian.com

Tuesday 3 June 2014 12.12 EDT



An ancient oak in Sherwood forest,

where Robin Hood is said to have sheltered. Photograph: Darren Ball/Alamy

Conservationists around the world are split over whether to let developers destroy green space in return for paying cash to restore equivalent space elsewhere, a meeting at London Zoo on Tuesday found.

Britain and 38 other countries have, or are in the process of setting in place, policies which will allow "biodiversity offsetting", a market system of conservation used in the US and Australia which aims to ensure that there is no net loss of nature from any development.

But giant oil and mining companies, as well as conservationists and governments at the first global conference on offsetting, heard that evidence from projects where offsets have been used is conflicting and that while they can be made to work there is no guarantee of success and many examples of failures.

"There is a great deal of public distrust about offsetting biodiversity. The concept of 'no net loss' is seen as questionable," said Kerry ten Kate, director of the Washington-based Business and Biodiversity Offsets Programme (Bbop), which works with corporations and others to develop offsets. "It could generate an order of magnitude greater investment in biodiversity but it must be done well," she said at the meeting.

The offset debate is central to future British nature conservation because environment secretary, Owen Paterson, [is keen to have laws passed here](#) which would allow ancient woods, wetlands and sites of special scientific interest to be destroyed to make way for road, housing and rail developments in return for new woods being planted or areas being flooded.

The UK government, which is analysing six pilot projects, has been taken aback by the public reaction.

"I don't think I have ever seen so much suspicion on either side of a debate," said Peter Unwin, director general of the policy delivery group at the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. "Clearly we cannot trade some aspects of biodiversity for others, but business is getting engaged."

Jonathan Baillie, conservation director at the Zoological society of London, said: "Biodiversity offsetting is controversial. It polarises the conservation community. [We must accept] there is going to be development and changes as world population increases from 7bn to 9.2bn by 2050. It may be appropriate to do offsets but that should be as a last resort."

Baillie gave the example of [potential oil exploitation in the world heritage-classified Virunga national park](#) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). "For this there should not be offsets. There are many other examples where offsets are just not applicable," he said.

But Julia Martin-Lefevre, director general of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, said the rights of countries to develop should be respected.

"Mining is central to many developing country governments. Offsetting must only be used as a means of last resort. It must be like-for-like. We must recognise the limits of biodiversity offsetting," she said. "We cannot compensate for loss in world heritage sites like Virunga. Nor can projects go ahead if it means the extinction of a species. We have to take a precautionary approach."

Tom Tew, director of the UK Environment bank, led calls for offsetting to be embraced by environmentalists. "It is a great opportunity to fund landscape-scale restoration projects. There is little money in biodiversity. [Offsetting] can deliver local schemes or regional or landscape-scale ones."

He was backed by South African offset developer Susie Brownlie who said offsets were a way for mining industries to contribute to conservation. "When developers are told that they will have to offset their plans, they often back off. Offsets mean nature cannot be traded off so easily. They are an opportunity for developers to contribute to conservation. But we need to put in place very clear rules", she said.

This was dismissed by several European-based organisations.

"It is a license to trash. It make the assumption that you can swap nature. We lose things when we offset things. It reinforces the belief that we can keep going with business as usual", said Hannah Mowat, of Fern, which tracks EU forest policies. "Destruction of complex and site specific biodiversity cannot be offset. It is time to be clear that offsetting will not tackle biodiversity loss but may impoverish communities."

"I am terrified," said Ariel Brunner, head of EU policy at Birdlife International. "Offsetting very easily becomes an off-the-shelf way to trash biodiversity and allow developers to bypass regulations."

Friends of the Earth and Fern have released details of several UK cases where offsetting is already being proposed by developers.

"[One case is Smithy Wood](#), near Sheffield, an ancient woodland much loved by local people, which is now threatened by a motorway service station. The developer has proposed planting new trees and improving management of another woodland to offset the damage, but local campaigners say they would still lose a forest that it would take 850 years to re-establish," says Sandra Bell of Friends of the Earth.

"Developers are already gearing up to use biodiversity offsetting to bulldoze some of our most precious wildlife sites. There is no clear evidence that biodiversity offsetting works – attempts abroad have frequently ended in failure," she said.

"It can be used as a tool of great benefit but it can be dangerous", said former head of Friends of the Earth, Tony Juniper. "Where there is no alternative, biodiversity offsets can be useful. But offsetting can be abused. If governments want to use this as a window-dressing for a pro-growth agenda, as I fear that Britain does, it can be very dangerous."