

Bio-diversity and greening the cities “next big thing”



Willow Aliento | 27 October 2014

A company that manages voluntary carbon offsets for a range of developers, councils and corporates, says “green infrastructure” or greening our cities and understanding the value of natural capital is the “next big thing”.

Wayne Wescott, chief executive of Greenfleet, has challenged developers, particularly those who work on the urban fringe, to come to grips with the need for biodiversity and green infrastructure.

These developers, he says, need to be part of a broader debate on the economic value of biodiversity and green infrastructure, and the role of forests in both carbon emissions abatement and in greening our urban environments.

“The [property] sector needs to meet and drive that. That’s leadership, and it needs to take that to the next level, looking at bigger ecosystem impacts and be part of the solution. I don’t suggest this is easy at all, but that’s what leadership is about.”

The organisation is undertaking work with Blue Carbon on examining the role of mangroves and seagrasses both in carbon mitigation and in terms of the value these types of coastal vegetation have in protecting coastal development from the impacts of natural disaster.

Wescott says the degree to which Phuket in Thailand was protected from the worst impacts of tsunami is a demonstration of the bottom-line value nature can add in terms of buffering areas.

“I’m unusual in that I’m quite optimistic, I’m optimistic that the fundamentals haven’t changed about the importance of biodiversity. I don’t think we translate the language of biodiversity very well, and I still think the struggle for us is to make sure decision-makers understand the value of ecosystem services.

“Carbon offsets is [Greenfleet’s] language, we could have used the language of ‘green infrastructure’.

"Investment in green infrastructure, greening our cities, is the next big thing. The starting place is to talk about natural capital, and move the argument to a financial base.

"It's a big interesting area, that area of what forests can offer and how that's incorporated into the economy. This is not a discussion that's happening in mainstream business circles, and there is a huge challenge ahead.

"The question for me is always, 'how do we implement this?'

Wescott has certainly done his part. Since commencing operations in 1997, the company has offset more than 2.2 million tonnes of carbon through the planting of more than 8.5 million trees and restoration of 400-plus biodiverse native forests.

The organisation's success, he says, is a demonstration of the commitment many companies and individuals have to tackling climate change through voluntary initiatives, regardless of what government policy may or may not do.

Clients have included the transport sector, with Smart Salary offering offsets via Greenfleet as part of vehicle leasing quotes. Others include Air Services Australia, Telstra, Europcar and most recently Car Next Door, which only weeks ago said it would offset every kilometre driven by users offset through tree planting.

There have also been local governments clients universities and large organisations such as Telstra, Carlton United Breweries, Wilson Parking, Sydney Water Authority, Citipower, Powercor and Qantas Credit Union.

About 20,000 individuals have also sought offsets.

"Greenfleet connects people who are concerned about climate change to people planting biodiverse forests around Australia," Wescott says.

"We monetise the carbon sequestration aspect of forests, and have worked out an economic way to do that as a not-for-profit," he says. The company now employs 10 staff.

The former founding chief executive of the international local governments for sustainability organisation, ICLEI, Wescott took the chief executives position in 2013, but had also worked with Green Fleet back in the "early days" from the local government end to obtain emissions offsets.

"It was quite an extraordinary idea back in the 1990s to be talking about climate change," he says.

"I had the view that structurally, a lot of people are very concerned about climate change. But it is very difficult [now] as the battle has become adversarial at the public policy level, which I think is a terrible shame. An ideological battle is a very poorly managed type of public policy process"

Wescott said that in the last five years, there has been increasing focus on the regulated market, for example the Carbon Farming Initiative.

The organisation is currently engaged in advocacy with the federal government around the CFI,

particularly the currently released methodologies, and whether existing – and growing – forests and the planting of new forest areas will be eligible activities under the Emissions Reduction Fund.

The methodology that has been released to date around forestry related to avoided clearing of native vegetation as an eligible activity, and there have been some indications that existing forests, even in the growth phase, will not be able to gain credits under the CFI.

This, while of concern to Wescott, does not impact the organisation greatly, as its financial foundation is squarely in the voluntary offset sector.

“At times like this [policy-wise], people get very dispirited about the government, so they tend to go off and deal with their own backyards. Voluntary action is very important, because people need that hope that voluntary action can make a difference,” he says.

“Things will swing back, and while these actions are not something that should happen instead of government action, when the pendulum does swing back, people will also see voluntary action made a difference too.

“I think public policy [on climate change] is a long-term war.”

“One of the things that surprises me is how passionately people support Greenfleet, they become great advocates,” Wescott says.

“There are a lot of quiet achievers, and they come from right across the political spectrum.

“It’s a very powerful insight [for people], to connect a concern that’s global and massive and seemingly impossible to resolve to something practical on the ground.”



Wayne Wescott

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