

## ***Opinion* Biodiversity Offsets As Corporate Responsibility: Opportunity Or Paradox?**

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*Biodiversity offsets has the potential to implement high quality conservation in the face of encroaching development. But, unless it's under attack, the concept remains almost unheard of among consumers. This is a big problem, according to a researcher on the subject who says growth and regulatory support depends on public opinion.*



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A visit to the [SpeciesBanking website](#) confirms what specialists have known for some time: that the p impacts to biodiversity is widespread. And while national, regional and local practices vary widely, one pc offsetting is an increasingly important mechanism for conservation as more and more companies use the biodiversity impacts.

However, few firms are choosing to offset as a way to manage their image and show consumers that they environmentally-responsible companies. The reasons for this may lie with the fact that very little is knowr consumers think of biodiversity offsets. And this unawareness at the consumer level could be impacting t to expand.

### **The ethical consumer – a new frontier for biodiversity offsets?**

For decades there has been an interest in understanding how consumers' ethical and environmental pre into behaviors. So far, these preferences has translated into what is known as the **ethical consumer** – interested in making purchases that have little negative environment and social impacts. Experts routinel these ethically-motivated consumers will drive companies to lessen their environmental impact, by withdr support – and their custom – from those firms perceived as causing unnecessary damage.

There is evidence that this is indeed the case: on the one hand, [study after study](#) has shown that **pec associate with brands and products lauded for their sustainability**. Green is good, and the hal sustainable products is not negligible. On the other hand, the [growth of ethical markets](#) such as Fair low carbon, and more recently FairWage – has been a well-documented phenomenon. Ethical and enviri by companies add value to products and improve brand reputation. Caring consumers will potentially pa products from businesses taking action to make the world a better place.

Despite this potential, the ethical consumer remains one of the great untapped resources in the development of biodiversity offsets. **While many companies acknowledge the potential of offsetting** as a mechanism for assuring goodwill and securing social license to operate, there is very little evidence that it is being used as a mechanism for managing corporate reputations or corporate social responsibility.

Apart from Walmart's association with the **Acres for America** programme, no companies have chosen to be involved with offsetting. In fact, the concept of offsetting biodiversity impacts remains virtually unheard of by consumers. And therein may lay one of the big problems for the offsetting industry.

### **Biodiversity Offsets in Britain: competing ideas and consumer confusion**

The British government has supported the introduction of biodiversity offsetting, and **6 biodiversity offsets have been operating in England since early 2012**. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that most consumers have not heard of biodiversity offsets. Nor have consumers heard of the idea of no net loss of biodiversity, which is a goal that would require companies to demonstrate measurable outcomes.

No net loss of biodiversity is not only a good formulation of an objective; it is also a high threshold. And the challenges associated with it often mean that, in order to demonstrate achieving no net loss, developers and offset providers err on the side of caution, and employ **high ratios of offset-to-development area**. It also means that companies must minimize activities harmful to nature. No net loss of biodiversity, along with ideas such as **zero net deforestation**, has the potential to be a good reputation management tool.

However, the reluctance of talking about offsetting to consumers has created a situation where, in Britain, biodiversity offsets are more often than not publicly attacked and condemned as a **license to trash**. The complexities of offsetting and the uncertainties surrounding how it is done, its limitations and its uses, have made biodiversity offsetting have been much more vocal about the topic than proponents, making use of both traditional and social media to promote this idea of **license to trash**.

This might lead to the potentially paradoxical situation where consumers may hear of biodiversity offsets in the context of a critique. Again, anecdotal evidence has suggested that some consumers first heard of biodiversity offsets while being asked to sign a petition against it! So much for corporate reputation management – this has made biodiversity offsets something that companies actively want to dissociate themselves from.

### **From good intentions to good communication**

For all the questions surrounding it, there is no question that those involved in biodiversity offsets have the best intentions. People genuinely want to do something which is both good for nature and for business. And one of the debates within the community reveals that all those involved are aware of the challenges and limitations of biodiversity offsets.

But it's clear, in Britain at least, that this message isn't reaching the consumers with those in opposition to offsetting communicating the most. This constitutes a problem: in democratic societies, public support is required for offsetting to be successful. And while promoters of biodiversity offsets have, rightly, attempted to obtain the attention and

makers, they must also take the time to address consumers.

Because majority of consumers haven't heard of biodiversity offsets, we genuinely don't know how they view them. But finding out is crucial because the future of this mechanism just might depend on where they sit.

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