

INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK

12 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT TREE (FOREST) 'OFFSETS'

Active Carbon Pool:

Carbon moves between forests, atmosphere and oceans in a complex natural rhythm of daily/seasonal/annual and multi-annual cycles. The overall amount in all three carbon stores together rarely increases in nature. This is 'active' carbon.

Fossil Carbon Pool:

Some carbon is locked away and rarely comes into contact with the atmosphere naturally. This 'fossil carbon' is stored permanently in coal, oil and gas deposits and therefore is not part of the active carbon pool. When humans mine and extract these reserves this inactive fossil carbon does not go back in the ground, but is added into the active carbon pool, disrupting a delicate balance.

This is one of the reasons that the concept of 'offsets' is flawed. Offsets allow extraction of oil, coal and gas to continue, which in turn increases the amount of fossil carbon that is released into the active carbon pool disrupting the cycle. That is why campaigners argue that genuine solutions to climate change require us to keep fossil carbon (oil, coal and gas) in the ground.

"Offsets are bad for the climate because they delay a shift away from our oil addiction!"

1. **Carbon in trees is temporary:** Trees provide temporary carbon storage as part of the normal cycle of carbon exchange between forests and the atmosphere. Trees can easily release carbon into the atmosphere through fire, disease, climatic changes, natural decay and timber harvesting.
2. **One-way road:** The release of fossil carbon in contrast is permanent and, over relevant time scales, will accelerate climate change by increasing the overall amount of carbon in the atmosphere – the very cause of today's climate change. Fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas are locked away and their carbon is only released when humans dig up and burn them for energy. Once released, they become part of the active carbon pool, disrupting the natural cycle.
3. **Fake credit:** Carbon credits from tree planting claim that carbon stored temporarily in tree plantations can justify permanent releases of fossil carbon into the atmosphere without any harm to the climate.
4. **Big foot:** Carbon credits from tree planting increase the ecological debt of the global North. The more fossil fuels a Northern country produces and consumes, the more land it is entitled to use to 'offset' its emissions. This is unfair and increases the already high ecological footprint of the North.
5. **Subsidies for mega-plantations:** Carbon credits from tree planting stand to provide a new subsidy for the plantations industry. Large-scale plantations have a long list of negative impacts on forests and forest peoples and often exacerbate local land disputes and violence.
6. **Communities suffer twice:** First, climate change affects the livelihoods of forest peoples and rural communities through increased droughts, floods, forest fires and deforestation. Second, carbon credits from tree planting promote the expansion of large-scale tree plantations-tree farms, which indigenous peoples and forest-dependent communities oppose in many parts of the world.

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7. Ticking time bomb: Avoiding climate change requires drastic reductions of greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels. The “carbon” bathtub is overflowing with too much CO₂ and greenhouse gases (GHG) being produced into the atmosphere. Offsets, however, allow emissions to continue under the false premise that they’ve been ‘neutralized’. This just masks the real crisis and sentences future generations to live with fewer choices and worse conditions.

8. Forest fraud: Forests play a vital role in storing carbon and buffering extreme weather events. But linking forest restoration with carbon credits is a dead-end for forest peoples as well as for the climate. Halting the forest crisis requires action against the underlying causes of deforestation, not more fossil carbon in the atmosphere and more monoculture and GMO tree plantations occupying land needed by local communities.

9. Blind guess: Measuring carbon in forests is fraught with uncertainties. Scientists have found that estimates of the carbon balance in Canadian forests could vary by 1,000 per cent if seemingly small factors – such as increased levels of atmospheric CO₂ – are taken into account.

10. Forests Become a Commodity: A market-based approach to conservation is currently in vogue and governments around the world are striving to use market mechanisms to resolve environmental crises such as deforestation and climate change. Many Indigenous Peoples are concerned about this trend as they consider that a utilitarian and mercantile attitude towards biodiversity does not take into account its intrinsic value and holistic spiritual nature. Trees and biodiversity become commodified and transformed into a legal object of property.

11. Creates Toxic Hotspots and Harms Indigenous Peoples in Far Distances: Using forest as carbon offsets establishes emission reduction targets for large industrial emitters to purchase offsets generated by forestry and agriculture activities that sequester carbon. This is where the money comes from that allows the polluter in some distant region to create a green-wash image they are “neutralizing” their carbon emissions by investing in tree plantations and forests in distant lands. In the meantime, as exemplified in the tar-oil sands of northern Alberta, Canada, the polluting industries are causing environmental destruction and health endangerment to First Nations and Métis. Indigenous governments choosing to participate in carbon offsets and carbon trading regimes could be participating in a carbon offset scheme that is obtaining money from a polluting industry that is causing sickness and death to Indigenous Peoples in other areas of the country or the world. Carbon trading and carbon offset mechanisms in fact, allow the fossil fuel industry to continue and even expand GHG and CO₂ releases into the atmosphere, causing climate change impact that directly affects us all.

12. Carbon credits from tree planting are a phony climate fix!

Carbon offsets are worse than doing nothing because they create the illusion in the public that action is being taken, while not actually addressing the task at hand—reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

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