

Policy Statement on Biodiversity Offsets Society for Ecological Restoration Australasia (SERA*)

Background

Biodiversity offsets are increasingly applied where development activities have unavoidable impacts on biodiversity as a means to compensate for biodiversity losses from such developments. However, there are wide inconsistencies in offsetting policies and practices across Australasia.

Many offsets rely on ecological restoration. In practice, there are considerable risks in using restoration for offsets due to time lags, uncertainties in outcomes, and poor ability to define and measure values to be offset (Maron *et al.* 2012, 2016). Given the link between biodiversity offsets and restoration practice, the application of offsets is a legitimate interest for SERA. It is in this context that SERA issues the following policy statement on biodiversity offsets.

Biodiversity offset statement

It is imperative to take urgent action to reverse the loss of biodiversity across the unique biodiversity and landscapes of Australasia. Biodiversity offsets that include ecological restoration may contribute to reversing biodiversity losses, but only within the following confined range of circumstances:

- A. Biodiversity offsets should only be used as a last resort, after consideration of alternatives to avoid, minimise or mitigate impacts.
- B. Offsets should be based on sound ecological knowledge and principles.
- C. Offsetting must achieve benefits in perpetuity.
- D. Offsets must be based on the principle of 'net gain'.
- E. Offset arrangements must be transparent, measurable and enforceable.

Consistent with the IUCN Offset Policy (2016), ecological restoration should only be accepted as part of a biodiversity offset where the following apply.

1. A sound ecologically based methodology has been applied to the measurement of losses, expected gains, and future management requirements. Such methods should be based on principles of continuous review and adaptive improvement.
2. There is no impact on intact ecosystems (including old growth elements) essential to conserving threatened species and ecological processes eg habitat trees. The promise of ecological restoration should never be used to justify the destruction or degradation of intact ecosystems; because full recovery is rarely achievable. This is particularly the case with old growth elements.
3. Offsets take full account of direct, indirect and cumulative impacts, geographically and over time.
4. Offsets follow the principle of like-for-like. Where this is not possible, multipliers must be increased proportionally and may involve habitat types that are under greater threat than those impacted.

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5. Long term contributions and multipliers (i.e. offset ratios) ensure that net gains are achieved, by accounting for uncertainty in outcomes and time delays inherent in ecological restoration.
6. An offset requiring ecological restoration is within reasonable proximity to the site of the area of loss.
7. Sufficient skills and knowledge are available to achieve the proposed compensation. In some cases research funding will be necessary to support the ecological restoration process.
8. The risks associated with ecological restoration are recognised and there is a high likelihood that restoration to an acceptable and sustainable standard can be achieved within a defined period of time. The SERA *National Standards for the Practice of Ecological Restoration* (2016) provides a suitable basis for planning and implementing restoration to a high standard.
9. Potential time lags are taken into account. Wherever possible, restoration should start well before the commencement of the development project (i.e. providing an offset in advance to avoid temporal loss); noting that many habitat elements can take long timeframes to develop.
10. Appropriate tenure, resources, management plans (including detailed risk assessments) and processes are in place to effectively manage and monitor the required ecological restoration outcomes.

Recommended actions

To facilitate effective biodiversity offset practice in Australasia, SERA recommends the following.

1. Development of national biodiversity offset frameworks with consistent principles and standards based on an objective of net gain.
2. Where offsets occur that include ecological restoration, legislation and regulatory policies at all levels of government should apply the most recent version of the SERA *National Standards for the Practice of Ecological Restoration in Australia*.
3. Biodiversity offsetting methodologies at all levels of government should take into account cumulative impacts and be based on principles of continuous improvement. This needs long term commitment to funding of on ground restoration and recovery as well as to adaptive research to ensure improvement in the accuracy of scientifically based assessment of biodiversity losses and gains.

References

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