

10 things you should know about tree 'offsets'



The Active Carbon Pool:

Carbon moves between the 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 naturally into contact with the atmosphere. 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.

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 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, which indigenous peoples and forest-dependent communities oppose in many parts of the world.

7. Ticking time bomb: Avoiding climate change requires drastic reductions of greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels. 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 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. Carbon credits from tree planting are a phony climate fix!

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