



Enablers: Net Zero and Big Conservation

Conservation organizations have played a key role in advancing the part of ‘net zero’ identified either as ‘Nature-based Solutions’ or ‘Natural Climate Solutions’. A number of these organizations have also worked for years to operationalize REDD+ [Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation], including through the creation of standards for crediting. They have shaped perceptions of net zero and nature, and the role of nature in climate action.

Background

The idea of ‘Nature-based Solutions’ was developed first by the International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN]. A 2016 publication by IUCN notes that “NbS is a relatively ‘young’ concept, still in the process of being framed,” while also suggesting NbS as a way to dispel the “lack of operational clarity” regarding new concepts in conservation and development. The NbS concept covered a range of approaches—from ecological restoration to ecosystem-based adaptation to area-based conservation to green infrastructure—but, it had little to say about rights or community-led approaches.

The ‘natural climate solutions’ approach came out of a process organized by The Nature Conservancy and anchored by a PNAS publication that made a first-order estimate of how much climate mitigation [in petagrams of carbon or CO₂ equivalent] that nature could contribute to the “well under 2°C” goal. Using a carbon budget model, and making no further assumptions about deep decarbonization in other sectors, natural climate solutions were seen potentially delivering “37% of cost-effective CO₂ mitigation needed through 2030” with a 66% chance of staying below 2 degrees.

Nature’s Climate Hub

These two strands came together in the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit, with a workstream on Nature-based Solutions, an events space called Nature’s Climate Hub, and a Manifesto on the role of NbS in climate action. CLARA also contributed two dozen different examples of community-led Nature-based Solutions to this Climate Action Summit workstream.

The 2019 Climate Action Summit also provided an opportunity for review of progress toward meeting the ten goals of the New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF), which was endorsed in 2014 by a broad coalition of governments, companies, civil society, and indigenous peoples organizations.

The NYDF Progress Report from 2019 concluded that “there is little evidence that these goals are on track and achieving the 2020 NYDF targets is likely impossible.”

The words ‘market’ and ‘offset’ do not appear in the NbS Manifesto. There’s no mention of using NbS to reach a ‘net zero’ target. Nonetheless, corporate interest in NbS spiked around the Nature’s Climate Hub, and much of the subsequent emphasis on using land-based offsets as a ‘Nature-based Solution’ to meet a ‘net zero’ commitment came out of this series of meetings. Activities at the Nature’s Climate Hub also indicated a move away from use of tangible and measurable goals to tackle problems like deforestation, such as those found in the New York Declaration on Forests, toward the far more nebulous goal set associated with ‘Nature-based Solutions’.

The Carbon Imperative

This shift presented a real challenge for many conservation organizations. Many had worked for years on biodiversity conservation, or making commodity supply chains ‘deforestation free’, and (in some cases) helping to secure recognition of rights and improvement of livelihoods for forest dwelling communities.

But increasingly, a narrower focus on carbon sequestration—increasing removals for mitigation purposes—informed the funding landscape, and then the strategies, associated with Big Conservation.

This is not to suggest that organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, WWF, Wildlife Works, IUCN, or Environmental Defense Fund have abandoned goals related to biodiversity, ‘deforestation-free’ development, and livelihoods. But increasingly they have associated their strategies with ‘net zero’ commitments and identified their actions as ‘Nature-based Solutions’.

In other words, even sophisticated conservation-and-development approaches increasingly had to fit into funding frameworks ultimately based only on counting volumes of sequestered carbon and the issuance and sale in the carbon market of VERs—Verified Emission Reduction credits. This single quantitative measure is of greatest interest to those engaged in carbon markets—both voluntary and compliance markets—and increasingly, it has driven the self-presentation of those organizations.

One example of this can be found in The Nature Conservancy's June 2021 statement on "Our Commitment to Carbon Credits and the Path to Net Zero." Environmental Defense Fund called the embrace of net zero a 'new business imperative' and launched an initiative to provide companies and industries with "sector-specific roadmaps...to drive meaningful change towards net zero." EDF and affiliated organizations have been very involved in both LEAF and CORSIA processes.

The challenge is also laid bare in a 2021 press release from Wildlife Works announcing its engagement with Hartree Partners. "Unprecedented Private-Sector Finance Deal to Generate Over \$2BN to Protect Threatened Forests, Wildlife, and Improve Community Livelihoods," says the press release. A portion of proceeds from the sale of VERs will be used for forest conservation and wildlife protection. The clients buying those VERs? "Large banking groups, insurance companies, airlines, asset managers, [plus] oil and gas companies."

Avoided Deforestation?

In the best case, VERs will quantify the increased sequestration that results from forest protection or restoration—and then, unless those credits are retired by a country or company, they are used as an offset. But another, less rigorous standard of claim leading to crediting also exists: 'avoided deforestation.' This rewards organizations, or communities, for preventing the *hypothetical* loss of forest cover. That is, a claim is made that certain lands or forests are 'at risk', and then efforts to protect those lands allows for normal growth and sequestration to continue—turning hypothetical future sequestration into traded carbon.

In addition to being the central organizing idea behind REDD+, this 'avoided deforestation' approach has become an important business approach for some conservation organizations. But Bloomberg Green noted in a 2020 story that avoided deforestation projects can actually undermine progress on climate change, when carbon credits are issued for lands that are otherwise well-protected. [The example given was of lands owned or managed by The Nature Conservancy.] Such projects "can siphon money from projects that actually result in concrete emission reductions," the article concludes.

The 'Lowering Emissions by Accelerating Forest Finance' [LEAF] coalition is a new entry in the REDD+ landscape. It was announced during the 2021 'Leaders' Summit on Climate

convened by US President Joe Biden. The LEAF Coalition brings together Norway, the U.K., the United States, and a number of technology and consumer-product companies in those countries that will use VERs to pay tropical and subtropical countries to reduce emissions from forest destruction. LEAF rejects the carbon 'project' approach in favor of what's called a 'jurisdictional approach' to REDD+, based on commitments made by national governments, subnational governments, or possibly, indigenous groups with control over territory.

Conclusion

IUCN observed the fragmented conceptual landscape for conservation and development work and proposed a specific term, 'Nature-based Solutions', to bring those approaches under a single banner. REDD+ became an agreed part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2013, as the 'Warsaw Framework for REDD+', and a variety of non-market approaches to REDD+ have been put forward.

But in the years since, companies that sought to reach a 'net zero' target have increasingly turned to 'Nbs' as both approach and justification for the purchase of offsets. Verification standards may measure the increased sequestration and expanded forest cover associated with reforestation or restoration projects; while other standards allow the use of *reductions in emissions away from a proposed baseline* as an appropriate instrument for claiming removals. This in effect rewards countries or subnational governments for doing *less* forest destruction but still diminishing the total forest estate. Clearly there's an urgent need for the scale-up of non-market mechanisms to address this challenge; offsetting to excuse continued fossil emissions isn't the answer.

The sponsorship of both 'Nbs' and 'market REDD+' approaches has become a major source of revenue for a few conservation organizations, including those most vocal in their support of 'Net Zero'. What does this portend for the future of conservation, if its leading proponents become ever-more financially dependent on carbon markets, and specifically on monetizing carbon through 'Nature-based Solutions'? Already there has been criticism of the 'fortress conservation' approach to meeting 30x30 targets.

If all attention is now on 'Nbs', what will happen to conservation solutions based on the recognition of rights, and support for indigenous groups to implement their preferred approaches?

The CLARA network includes climate justice advocates, faith groups, conservation groups, land-rights campaigners, agroecologists, and representative of peoples movements around the globe. Our commitment to social justice brought us into the climate debate and informs our approaches to climate solutions. For more information about CLARA, visit www.CLARA.earth

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