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European Commission's biodiversity offset report shows it is deaf to the concerns of EU citizens

Despite their own consultation on a possible No Net Loss (NNL) initiative showing little support for biodiversity offsetting in the EU, the European Commission have released a large and detailed study on how to implement biodiversity offsetting at the EU level.¹

The Commission has been researching policy options to tackle EU biodiversity loss including an NNL initiative. A consultation on this initiative came to an end on 17 October 2014, but questions are arising about whether the outcome of the consultation was a foregone conclusion, as the EU seems to have simultaneously commissioned a detailed study of how to implement one of the possible policy options, known as 'biodiversity offsetting.'²

"The commissioning of this study before the consultation was even completed raises concerns that the European Commission is deaf to the concerns of EU citizens. It was a callous waste of resources in a time of austerity and stokes concerns that attempts to pursue biodiversity offsetting are ideologically driven," warns Hannah Mowat from FERN.

Biodiversity offsetting is based on the principle that biodiversity destroyed in one place can be measured and replaced in another. However, according to the findings of the EU's own study, once biodiversity is lost, it may be lost forever: *"We do not have the experience to know how durable offsets are over the long term, and how well each of the mechanisms performs against its stated aims over the long term... the long term effectiveness of mechanisms available to secure long term conservation benefits cannot yet be fully evaluated."*³

Recent analysis of 108 examples of habitat restoration challenged the capacity of biodiversity offsets to achieve NNL on the grounds that restoration implies long time delays and a low certainty of success. The scientists conclude that there is *"little support that current theory and practice leads to a no net loss of biodiversity...a solid empirical foundation for restoration offsets to match the elaborate theory is currently lacking."*⁴ Emerging evidence from Member States also shows that biodiversity offsetting is harming communities because they lose local nature and have less time to respond to the speeded up planning applications.⁵

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the results of the consultation showed there is little support for biodiversity offsetting. Almost half of all respondents believe any NNL initiative should not include offsetting (43.7%), and there was a clear (46.2 %) rejection of the setting up of an EU level legal framework for compensation/offsetting. The consultation also showed overwhelming support for the strengthening of existing legislation and policies, suggesting that this would be the most fruitful pathway for the European Commission to engage in if it were to pursue an NNL initiative.

"The people of the EU have made it clear that there is no future for biodiversity offsetting," said Hannah Mowat, *"it just remains to be seen whether the European Commission is listening."*

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/nnl/pdf/Biodiversity%20offsets%20metrics%20and%20mechanisms.pdf>

² This study appears to have been commissioned in 2013 and cost €69, 243 EUR. Available at: <http://ted.europa.eu/udl?uri=TED:NOTICE:32060-2014:TEXT:EN:HTML>

³ p.99 of study – see footnote 1

⁴ Michael Curran, Stefanie Hellweg, and Jan Beck 2014. Is there any empirical support for biodiversity offset policy? *Ecological Applications* 24:617–632

⁵ <http://www.fern.org/sites/fern.org/files/Offset%20stories%20-%20Final.pdf>