

What the **Global Biodiversity Framework** says about the conservation of ecosystems and species



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In December 2022, in Montreal (Canada), 196 States signed a Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), pledging to take urgent action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. No doubt a historic achievement for the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, but is the framework really fit for purpose?

Here, we take a closer look at the targets in the GBF, and what they mean for the conservation of ecosystems and species - what's good, what's bad, what's missing, and how can movements and NGOs use it?

The good

[Target 4](#) calls for urgent management actions to prevent species extinction. Wherever there is a risk of extinction, governments now have to take action to significantly reduce that risk and ensure that there is a sufficient genetic variety of the species while also minimising human-wildlife conflict. This includes "in situ" (on site) conservation, meaning that plants or animals are kept healthy in their natural habitat. This can consist of, for example, supporting farmers to conserve seeds.

The bad

Leading up to COP15, there was considerable advocacy for a "[nature positive](#)" concept, which implies that if the total size of all conserved and restored areas is even slightly larger than that of all destroyed areas, it would be considered a win despite the resulting destruction. Although the nature positive concept wasn't endorsed in the final text, offsetting is still implied and enabled by the approach of total areas of nature without further specification throughout the text.

What is offsetting?

Offsetting is a harmful and often unsuccessful practice of compensating for the destruction of nature through restoration and conservation practices. It fails to tackle the root causes of biodiversity loss such as corporate power, perpetuates environmental injustices and doesn't consider ecosystem functions, the impacts of biodiversity loss, and Indigenous rights, while playing into the false notion that ecosystems are interchangeable.

Offsetting is portrayed as a financial resource, even though, in reality, restoring ecosystems is costly and frequently ineffective. Therefore, permitting the destruction of one ecosystem through the restoration of another results in significantly higher costs than simply conserving one area. This means there is no additional funding available to conserve ecosystems.

Finally, the concept of Nature-Based Solutions appears in the GBF twice and is linked to the use of biodiversity as an offset for carbon emissions (e.g. tree planting), which will likely be implemented through offsetting practices.

Mixed feelings

Target 1 aims to bring the loss of areas of high biodiversity importance, including ecosystems of high ecological integrity, close to zero by 2030. This objective could help deter the advancement of detrimental

development projects in essential ecosystems. However, the emphasis on spatial planning could again enable the use of offsets by only considering the overall share of land dedicated to biodiversity rather than preserving ecosystems as they are. On the other hand, the specific inclusion of respect for the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities can help ensure that their voices are heard and their knowledge and expertise are valued in decision-making processes.

Under Target 2, governments are tasked with ensuring that 30% of degraded areas are restored by 2030. While this goal is an opportunity to improve ecological integrity and connectivity in recognised degraded areas, there are concerns. For one, governments may try to minimise the extent of areas categorised as degraded to avoid the financial obligations associated with restoration. The lack of a clear definition of “degraded” can cause some areas to be misclassified, leading to ecosystem losses. There is also a high risk that restoration in one area may justify the destruction of another through offsetting schemes since there are no provisions guaranteeing that restoration efforts complement conservation efforts.

The requirement for conserved areas outlined in Target 3, emphasising effective conservation and management through ecologically representative, well-connected, and equitably governed systems, could enhance the quality of conserved areas. These provisions can serve as tools to hold governments accountable when conservation efforts are inadequate or when corporate activities degrade protected areas. However, there are significant concerns that this target may result in the world being divided into a 30% category of “untouchable nature”, with compensation for the destruction of the remaining 70%.

The missing

There is a lack of clear and distinct objectives for reducing ecosystem loss, the preservation of existing

valuable ecosystems and restoration which further enables offsetting.

Such objectives should be measured independently and not be allowed to compensate each other. Significant disruptions of essential ecosystems should have been outright prohibited, including mountaintop removal mining, deep-sea mining, arctic drilling, fracking, drainage of peatlands, etc. No such ban was made, thereby allowing for the ongoing massacre of ecosystems.

The GBF’s conservation objectives also focus almost solely on ecosystems in conserved areas and species conservation. Measures to improve biodiversity in all other areas, including those inhabited by humans, are largely missing. The connection between conservation and the key drivers of biodiversity loss such as industrial agriculture, mining, and fossil fuel extraction are also not adequately acknowledged. The relevant targets are often counterproductive, based on measures that are merely greenwashing tactics.

Using the GBF to win battles at the national and local level

Parts of the GBF that validate and allow for the scaling up of offsetting are likely to define policies at the national level in the future. Civil society will need to actively push back on these attempts by governments and corporations who rely on offsetting practices to justify the destruction of nature.

Civil society could also make use of the provisions under Target 2 to define areas as degraded, as these gain a higher chance of being restored and protected. The emphasis on the quality of conserved areas, which includes effectiveness, ecological representativity and well-connectedness and equitably governed can be a parameter for civil society to hold their governments to account.

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