

Social licence to operate and marine offsets

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Community acceptance of biodiversity offset policies

Biodiversity offset policies exist at the National and State Government levels to ensure that offsets for residual environmental damages are undertaken in an ecologically equivalent manner.¹

However, the policies don't address whether the wider community accepts all aspects of an ecologically effective offset design.

Could community concern reduce the social licence to operate of the proponent responsible for the residual damages?

Using discrete choice experiments, we will investigate the preferences that the Australian community hold for different characteristics of marine biodiversity offsets.

Marine biodiversity offset characteristics to be evaluated

Direct versus compensatory measures

- Will the community accept an offset that doesn't provide a like-for-like environmental outcome?
- Is conservation research a suitable compensatory measure where like-for-like outcomes can't be achieved with scientific certainty?



Direct offsetting is possible for marine turtle populations – fencing off their nesting habitats can improve breeding success.



However, for species of seagrass, little is known about whether direct offset attempts, such as replanting, would be successful. Research could improve our understanding.

Location of the offset

- Are offsets acceptable if they occur at a distance away from the impacted site?
- Will this diminish the use value of the offset?
- Does the community trust that overseas offsets can be appropriately regulated?

Offsets for migratory seabirds could be implemented near the Australian coast. Conservation benefits could also result from offsets that protect the birds' key habitats overseas.



Extent or length of the impact

- Is the acceptability of an offset dependent on the extent and duration of the residual damage?

Institutional arrangements

- Would the community prefer the proponent or the Government to manage and implement the offset?
- Is the Government seen as selling out on the environment if they manage the offset?

¹See: Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (2012) *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 Environmental Offsets Policy*, Australian Government, Canberra.