Biodiversity offsets in ACT spark ire

Date

January 29, 2014

[**Lisa Cox**](http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/by/Lisa-Cox)



The ACT government is retrospectively claiming work in territory nature reserves as biodiversity offsets so that it can plough ahead with new urban developments, say two senior ANU academics. *Photo: Supplied*

The ACT government is retrospectively claiming work in territory nature reserves as biodiversity offsets so that it can plough ahead with new urban developments, say two senior ANU academics.

In a piece in Tuesday's *Canberra Times*, Dr Philip Gibbons, from the Fenner School of Environment Society, and Professor Jochen Zeil, convener of the Friends of Mount Majura, say conserving biodiversity in the territory has become dependent on its destruction.

The academics write that the ACT government is breaching environmental policies that require urban developments which impact on threatened species to be offset elsewhere.

Dr Gibbons said the rules meant there should be no net loss to biodiversity in the ACT when new developments were approved.

This meant any work claimed as an offset had to be additional to any activities that were already taking place to preserve Canberra's natural environment.

''One of the principles is that biodiversity offsets must be additional to anything that would have happened anyway,'' Dr Gibbons said.

''What the ACT government is doing is it's announced for suburbs in north Canberra areas biodiversity offsets that have already been put aside in nature reserves.

''It's really in contravention of one of the principles of the whole policy: the principle of additionality.''

Dr Gibbons said activities in existing reserves had been claimed as biodiversity offsets for the suburbs of Throsby and Kenny, as well as parts of north Watson.

He said it in effect meant that the work of conservation volunteers was being ''retrospectively used to subsidise urban development''.

It also created a situation where work in natural reserves became dependent on environmental destruction in other parts of the territory.

''Some of the volunteer conservation community in Canberra is pretty angry about this,'' he said.

''The expansion of our reserves will only continue to happen if we continue to destroy biodiversity.

''That's a pretty perverse link to create.''

Comment was sought from the ACT government.

Read more: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/biodiversity-offsets-in-act-spark-ire-20140128-31l8f.html#ixzz2sKGN3hoV>

It's becoming harder to see the trees for the revenue

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* Read later

**Philip Gibbons, Jochen Zeil**

Adoption of the offsets policy is seeing a shift in conservation.

We like to think of Canberra as Australia's bush capital so it is ironic the ACT government has adopted a policy whereby conserving our biodiversity is becoming dependent on its destruction.

In an attempt to stop the continuing loss of biodiversity, the federal government introduced a policy in 2012 that allows development to proceed only if any significant impact on threatened flora and fauna can be offset with equivalent gains elsewhere. That is, each development should result in no net loss of biodiversity.

This approach is broadly known as biodiversity offsets and is now a feature of government policy in many countries.

As most urban development in the ACT has an impact on nationally threatened box gum woodlands, native grasslands or threatened species such as the striped legless lizard, the ACT government has now been applying the new federal environmental offsets policy for over a year.

However, early indications are that the ACT is applying this policy in a manner that is fundamentally changing the way we go about conservation.

International standards and the federal policy on biodiversity offsets state, as a key principle, offsets must deliver gains in biodiversity that would not have otherwise occurred.

The federal policy states as, an example, that this generally prohibits establishing offsets in existing nature reserves.

This is because there is a very high duty of care by governments to conservation in nature reserves, so there is little capacity to obtain gains in biodiversity within nature reserves that are additional to existing commitments.

Early application of the federal offset policy in the ACT is in clear contravention of this principle of additionality.

For example, impacts on threatened species from proposed development of new Gungahlin suburbs such as Kenny and Throsby will be offset with actions in the existing Mulligans Flat, Mulangarri and Gungaderra nature reserves.

Similarly, a proposed development in North Watson has been permitted because of a biodiversity offset in the nearby Justice Robert Hope Park.

In each case we can find no documentation to indicate these reserves were originally intended as biodiversity offsets, since all were established before biodiversity offsets were adopted as policy. Further, most of the offsets in these reserves represent existing obligations of the ACT government under its Nature Conservation Act 1980.

Thus, the government is claiming, as offsets, conservation activities that should have occurred anyway and in doing so is simply saving money at the expense of threatened species.

Further, volunteers who have been improving biodiversity in these reserves over many years through actions such as weeding, planting and pest control, have unwittingly contributed to an equivalent loss of biodiversity elsewhere.

It is dishonest for the ACT government to retrospectively claim the gains in biodiversity that have accrued because of the goodwill of volunteers to effectively subsidise development. Volunteers may not be keen to offer their services if they knew they were to be used in this way.

Conservation of natural heritage is a core responsibility of government and it is obliged to do this as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity.

We appear to be witnessing a shift in the ACT to a model whereby the conservation of our natural heritage is dependent on the revenue generated from its continuing destruction. This is an inappropriate way to sustain our moniker as the bush capital.

**Dr Philip Gibbons is senior lecturer in biodiversity conservation, Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU.**

**Professor Jochen Zeil, also at the ANU, is convener of Friends of Mt Majura.**

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/its-becoming-harder-to-see-the-trees-for-the-revenue-20140128-31l2b.html#ixzz2sKGyQ55L>