

Carbon offsetting and the loss of Scottish land

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I have written previously for “VoiceForArran” on Greenwashing (*Greenwashing is all the Rage* October 2021) and on the principles which are in The Green Claims Code explained in Chapter 3 of the CMA’s (Competition and Markets Authority’s):

- claims must be truthful and accurate
- claims must be clear and unambiguous
- claims must not omit or hide important relevant information
- comparisons must be fair and meaningful
- claims must consider the full life cycle of the product or service
- claims must be substantiated

However, my latest extremely urgent concerns are about **CARBON OFFSETTING**, and these frequently are related to trees, and peat landscapes, especially now in the rush to buy up land in Scotland. To set the record straight, we need to break down why carbon offsetting is a false solution to the climate crisis and how it is being used for greenwashing by those who want to keep on with business as usual.

What is offsetting?

Carbon offsetting is a licence to keep polluting, and distracts us all from the real work of cutting emissions. It is where companies and governments try to meet their carbon reduction targets by securing, preserving and promoting carbon fixation elsewhere while still emitting carbon from existing activity. Some will say that my view is a cynical view! After all the carbon cycle is the driver of all life on earth including human life.

Here is how offsetting works: Let us say you run an oil-fired power station. The oil used to produce energy and the CO₂ emitted through combustion goes into the atmosphere and contributes to heating our world. That is incontrovertible. But offsetting then encourages the power owners to point at a forest and say, “I’m paying for those trees not to be burned so now we’re even”. Of course, this does nothing whatsoever to

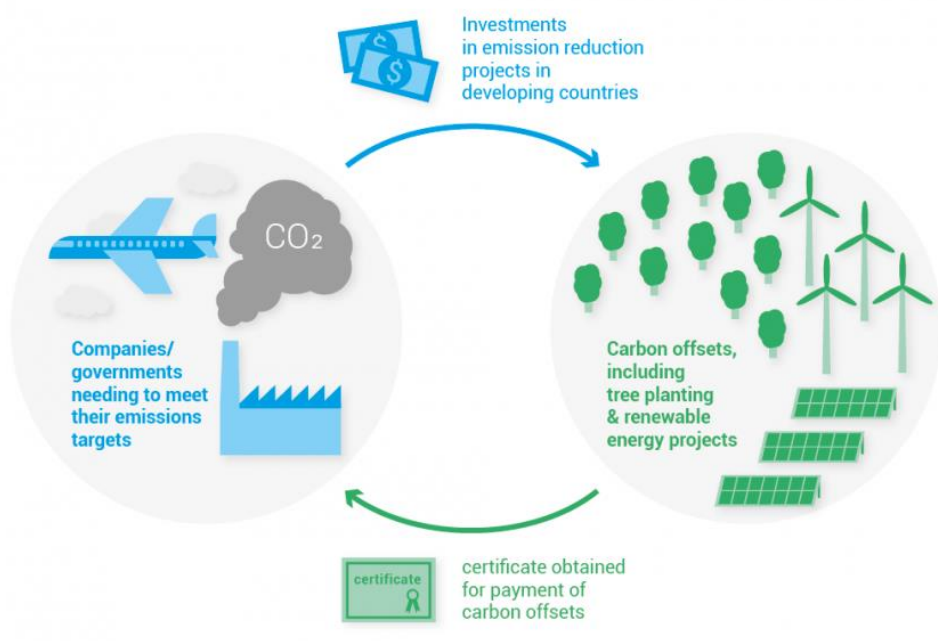
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change the fact that the CO₂ from the energy plant continues to warm the atmosphere — it just lets you show a balance on paper. Buy a chunk of the Amazon rainforest, preserve it and secure the present into the future or buy peat bog land in Scotland, do nothing, or perhaps upland pasture and plant trees, one step better in fixing carbon through photosynthesis and Bobs your uncle. Essentially you have achieved nothing in reducing the overall atmospheric burden of CO₂ that has been increasing since the start of the industrial revolution outstripping the ability of our worldwide carbon fixing mechanisms from photosynthesis to chemical limestone formation in our oceans.



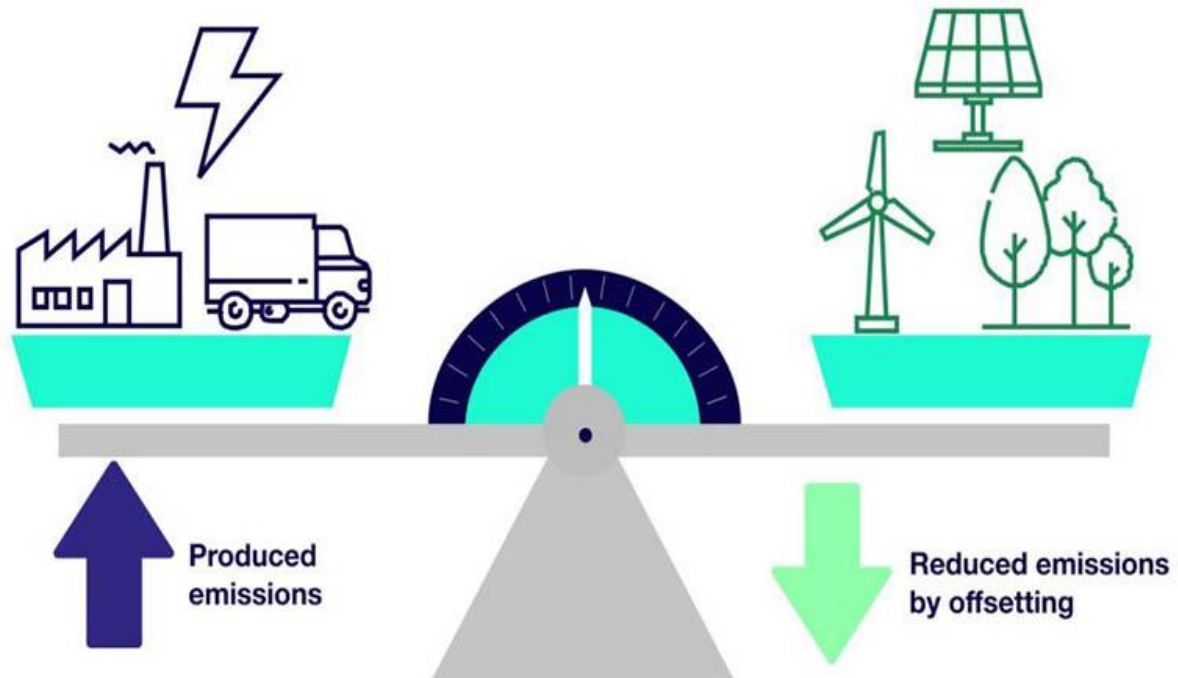
So, carbon offsetting is **a way of paying for others to reduce emissions or absorb CO₂ to compensate for your own emissions**. For example, by planting trees to suck carbon out of the atmosphere as they grow, or by delivering energy-efficient cooking stoves to communities in developing countries. Airlines and oil companies continually talk about carbon offsetting. But to be serious about tackling climate change, they need to stop carbon emissions from getting into the atmosphere in the first place. This applies equally to all of us too.

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Sadly, the way out of the climate emergency is just not that simple as offsetting.

Of course, protecting forests and restoring natural ecosystems is vital both for wildlife and the climate, but we, that is YOU and I, should be doing that *as well* as cutting emissions directly, not as a substitute. The big problem with offsets is not that what they offer is bad – tree planting or renewable energy and efficiency for poor communities are all good things – but rather that they do not do what they say on the tin. They do not actually cancel out – or in the jargon, offset – the emissions to which they are linked.

Offsetting projects simply do not deliver what the world needs – a reduction in the carbon emissions entering the atmosphere. Instead, they are a distraction from the real solutions to climate change. As a result, offsetting allows companies like BP and Shell as well as airlines, even clothes makers, importers, exporters and shipping companies too, to continue with their unsustainable behaviour while shifting their

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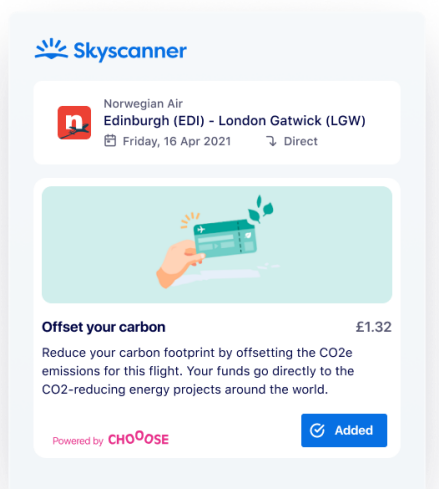
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responsibility for the climate onto the consumer. But it is just not airlines and fossil fuel companies.

Greenpeace (2020) in “**Planting trees can’t replace slashing carbon emissions**” showed that many companies use offsetting to appear environmentally friendly, even when their whole business is based around burning fossil fuels. Airports like Heathrow as an example: Heathrow’s website announced its intention to become a zero-carbon airport by the mid-2030s, after reaching carbon-neutral status for its buildings and infrastructure on 21 February, 2020.

Their Offsetting approach? The airport has forayed into peatland restoration, which the firm has always touted as a key component of Heathrow 2.0 – its sustainability strategy for carbon-neutral expansion. The company partnered with Lancashire Wildlife Trust and Defra on its first peatland restoration project, with the sustainability report revealing that a total of 70 hectares of the habitat are set to be restored under the scheme. The airport also gives passengers the option to offset flight emissions through a new partnership with the **CHOOOSE** ‘climate streaming service’ offsetting platform.



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Heathrow Airport writes it will offset the remaining 7% of infrastructure emissions through tree-planting projects in Indonesia and Mexico that will be certified through the Verified Carbon Standard. Notice, there is nothing here that means behaviour has to change... just pay and not feel guilty! And enough is known about these certification schemes that suggests they are purely tick box exercises. "You pay your money and get a certificate". Heathrow claims that offsetting will be an interim measure and will funnel £1.8m of new investment this year on nature-based carbon capture solutions in the UK. Ullapool in Scotland, for example, will benefit from a native woodland creation project part-funded by Heathrow. In partnership with Forest Carbon, the project will cover 87.4 hectares. View www.forestcarbon.co.uk

Quoting from their website: "Forest Carbon leads the way in developing woodland creation and peatland restoration projects for carbon capture and ecosystem services in the UK". They quote that they have planted over 10.3 million new trees in 220+ new woodlands since 2006 with their partners removing over 2.1 million tonnes of CO₂e from the atmosphere, as well as providing a host of other benefits to society, including habitat creation, biodiversity support, flood mitigation, river ecosystem improvement and public access. Viewing their partners appears to cover many carbon polluting industries, many also in the service sector.

Their new woodland schemes spread across Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland. They are certified by the Woodland Carbon Code – which is supported by the UK government and internationally recognised by ICROA (International Carbon Reduction and Offset Alliance). Planting the 'right tree in the right place' is required though adherence to the Forestry Commission standards. It all sounds good, a win- win, but how much less carbon is being produced by the companies in their businesses? Their peatland schemes can be found in Scotland and Wales. They are certified by the Peatland Code which is supported by the IUCN. These certification codes assure the additionality and permanence of each tonne of carbon stored. All those certifications are cause for severe scepticism having seen other certification schemes I have previously written about. They look good, sound good, but these offsetting schemes

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are largely a scam. Outside of the UK their partners have offset a further 1 million tonnes CO2 and protected or planted in excess of 3 million trees.

Then there are airlines such as easyJet which offer a carbon offsetting service, allowing passengers to pay to plant up to 12 trees per month. Oil giant BP runs a Target Neutral programme which incorporates a range of offsetting projects, including protecting forests in Brazil. Tree planting is frequently lauded by companies such as Shell and BP as the answer to the climate emergency. Forests are one of our best lines of defence against climate change and restoring them is crucial, but **this cannot be a substitute for reducing carbon emissions directly.**

A newly-planted tree can take as many as 20 years to capture the amount of CO2 that a carbon-offset scheme promises. We would have to plant and protect a massive number of trees for decades to offset even a fraction of global emissions. Even then, there is always the risk that these efforts will be wiped out by droughts, wildfires, tree diseases and deforestation.

When trees and plants die, whether from fires, drought (like in Scotland summer 2021), severe winds (Winter 2021), logging or simply old age, most of the carbon they have trapped in their trunks, branches and leaves returns to the atmosphere. The UK is known for its turbulent weather. Coming into winter, we expect to see higher winds, heavier rain and snow too. However, Storm Arwen in December 2021 was a considerable step above the usual bad weather. In numbers the damage amounted to:

- Around 4,000 hectares of Scottish forests affected by storm damage (a bit less than the size of Dundee)
- About 1 million cubic metres of fallen trees, roughly 1/3 of what we would fell in a given year nationally, and about 400 Olympic-sized swimming pools full of timber.

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Taken as a whole, the storm wreaked widespread damage in Scottish forests, particularly in the south and east of the country. Changes in the climate mean that droughts and higher temperatures will strain forests in the future. **The risk is that trees planted as part of offsetting projects could become a source of emissions if they die prematurely. Carbon “stored” in trees or other ecosystems is not the same as fossil carbon left underground.**

Is OFFSETTING a SCAM? It is certainly a bookkeeping trick intended to obscure climate wrecking-emissions. It is tree planting window dressing aimed at distracting from ecosystem destruction. It is the next big thing in greenwashing — and we must not be fooled. The climate crisis is real, and we all need real solutions. There is nothing wrong per se with mixed forest tree planting but our crisis in man-made global warming is accelerating too fast to be solved by trees. We need to get out of fossil fuels quickly.

Meanwhile, the fraud of carbon offsetting is built upon many of the hallmarks of a classic con:

- Greed drives it — Big Oil and corporate polluters want to keep putting short term profits over people and the planet.
- It feigns compassion — The same climate villains want to publicly appear to be taking climate action to help their image. It is total greenwashing.
- It preys on fear — With climate impacts already increasing worldwide, we are all afraid of experiencing the worst-case climate scenarios.
- It takes advantage of uncertainty — Climate denial and misinformation bankrolled by Big Oil has intentionally fostered unnecessary and counterproductive confusion despite the science being clear that we urgently need to drastically reduce carbon emissions in order to stay on track for the Paris Agreement 1.5°C warming limit.

We need real solutions; we need to get emissions down to REAL ZERO without being distracted or derailed by offsets and so-called “net zero.”

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Offsets and Justice

There is a reason that Indigenous Environmental Network and Indigenous Climate Action held a protest against offsetting at COP26, the UN's annual climate conference: Offsetting incentivises the commodification of nature and allows powerful corporations to take over the lands of vulnerable communities, risking human rights abuses. Offset schemes often exclude local and Indigenous Peoples from land management practices that allow them to grow food and preserve biodiversity.

Carbon offsets put a price on nature. The richest nations and corporations cannot be allowed to commoditise, to commodify nature, and buy off lands in poorer countries for offsets, so they can keep polluting the atmosphere. Nature-based offsetting projects distort economies and take land and resources away from the local communities that need it most. Nature should remain off limits to corporate control for climate offsets.

Offsets distract us from the climate actions we need. It gives the false impression that there is a way out of the crisis without every government and business cutting their own emissions which leads to delaying or dampening ambition to do the real work.

So, what are Net Zero emissions pledges? These are the other side of the counterfeit offsetting coin. Basically, Net Zero is what you "achieve" by pretending that you can balance out continued emissions from burning oil by protecting a forest or planting trees. Net Zero pledges also assume that there are no limits to compensate one's own emissions with reductions or increased carbon removal elsewhere. They ignore the fact that plants need time to grow, whilst cutting fossil fuel emissions has immediate results. They assume that adding up all Net Zero pledges would get us to the 2050 vision of globally not emitting more carbon than can be reabsorbed. But it will not.

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Instead of Net Zero, **Greenpeace wants governments to be aiming for 'Real Zero' emissions.** And that applies to each one of us in our everyday lives.

Offsetting and the Net Zero approach are popular because they allow carbon emitters to keep on emitting while masquerading as green. They can also be cheaper than paying fines for missing emissions reduction targets. Voluntary 'carbon credits' from schemes investing in forest protection or restoration can be bought for less than \$10/£8 per tonne CO₂.

So, what about Scotland in this new lucrative financial market of Offsetting? Trees, Carbon Offsetting and the Loss of our Land

A recent Landward Programme with Dougie Vipond (www.bbc.co.uk BBC Scotland Landward, 2022 Episode 2, Galloway, about 16 minutes into the programme) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0016fxc> illustrated just how land use is changing in Scotland as farms are being bought up at high cost by Institutional Investors, Private Equity Funds, Pension Funds, Foreign investors for use in forestry and offsetting potential. Patrick Laurie is a hill farmer and writer from Galloway. He is the best-selling author of the Wainwright Prize-nominated *Native: Life in a Vanishing Landscape*, becoming one of the Times and Sunday Times Nature Books of the Year 2020. His '*Bog and Myrtle Peat*' blog attracts around 30,000 visitors a year. He described how land values have risen in the last 5 years from £1500 to £5000 per acre encouraging farmers to sell up so changing the rural economy with straight swap from farming to industrial forestry. Well written and interesting pieces in Glenkens Gazette (see www.glenkengazette.co.uk) for June/July 2022, Issue 130 on *Land Use in the Glenkens* tells of lobbying by Communities for Diverse Forestry. There is increasing concern for the mixed economy of the area. Patrick Laurie's piece on *Farming in a Changing Landscape* is a timely reminder that money is speaking louder than community needs and James Ramsey writes in *Trees, Carbon Offsetting and the Loss of our Land*, "The current climate change mitigation strategy is built around tree planting that will see the destruction of farmland...the loss of habitats, flora, fauna and

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people, all to be replaced by foreign-owned carbon-offset Sitka forests that don't actually offset carbon or slow carbon warming at all, but actually contribute to it". This Gazette, part of A Glenkens Community and Arts Trust (GCAT) initiative gives a timely warning that communities need to watch and be vigilant about this offsetting drive across Scotland's beautiful wild and rural areas. Nowhere is immune.

References:

Glenkens Gazette (2022) Land use in the Glenkens. Issue 130

www.Greenpeace.co.uk **What is #realzero? Become a Real Hero Zero**

U.K. Gov. (2021) The Green Claims Code checklist. CMA guidance on environmental claims on goods and services. Helping businesses comply with their consumer protection law obligations. Report

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