
Conservation NGOs Gift Polluters a Massive Land Grab called ‘Nature Based Solutions’

While the concept of ‘Nature Based Solutions’ has eagerly been seized upon by polluting industries, financial institutions and governments, its origins lie somewhere else. The idea was developed by large international conservation groups, and was foreseen as a mechanism for increasing available funding for their own interests.

The concept of ‘Nature Based Solutions’ (NBS) (also often called ‘Natural Climate Solutions’, NCS) has enthusiastically been seized upon by polluting industries to greenwash climate-changing emissions and by governments to avoid unpopular political decisions needed to quickly reduce fossil fuel use. The consequences of allowing these nature-based distractions to form a significant part of any global climate strategy could be catastrophic. But the idea was originally developed and promoted by institutions which claim to be acting on behalf of the planet – large international conservation groups, in pursuit of their own corporate interests.

Origins – a plan to cash-in on protected areas

The terms ‘Nature-Based Solutions’ and ‘Natural Climate Solutions’ first appeared in December 2009. In a position paper for the UN climate negotiations in Copenhagen (COP15), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) stated that it *“is promoting nature-based solutions to climate change as an integral part of broader adaptation and mitigation plans and strategies. REDD-plus is a rapidly implementable mitigation option...”* (1). Simultaneously, IUCN published a book entitled ‘Natural Solutions: protected areas helping people cope with climate change’. (2) This claimed (dishonestly) that *“Protected areas play a major role in reducing climate changing carbon dioxide emissions in the atmosphere”*. (3) The book noted how protected areas in Canada sequestered four billion tons of carbon dioxide *“estimated to be worth \$39-87 billion in carbon credits”*. IUCN is self-proclaimed as *“the global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to safeguard it”*, whose members include 91 governments and nearly 1200 NGOs.

This first-ever report on so-called ‘Nature-Based Solutions’ resulted from a pact (‘Pact 2020’) (4) formed at the World Conservation Congress organized by IUCN in October 2008, which aimed to:

“Ensure that protected areas and protected area systems are recognised as an important contribution to climate change adaptation/mitigation strategies for biodiversity and human livelihoods”.

The concept of NBS was developed by the conservation sector and was foreseen as a mechanism for increasing funding available for protected areas, supported by carbon markets and private sector investment. Despite long-known and unresolved global problems of conflict with displaced communities, the conservation industry has sought to progressively increase the area of land it exclusively controls, at the expense of rural people.

>From the outset, trees and forests were central. According to more recent (and highly exaggerated) estimates (see below), 75% of NBS’s claimed climate mitigation potential relates to plantations and

forest management. (5) Largely a re-branding of REDD+, the concept allows pollution to continue by offsetting it with plantations or forest carbon sequestration.

Following the December 2015 adoption of the UN Paris Agreement, international conservation groups started ramping up pressure for support to so-called 'Nature-Based Solutions' or 'Natural Climate Solutions'. In early 2016, the US-based NGO The Nature Conservancy (TNC, the world's richest conservation corporation) started a campaign describing 'Natural Climate Solutions' as "The Forgotten Solution", emphasising that the claimed climate mitigation potential for this should attract a commensurate amount of 'attention' (i.e. funding). (6) In September 2016, IUCN adopted a definition of NBS at the World Conservation Congress (7) and by the end of the year had published an 'NBS manifesto'. (8)

>From the outset, conservationists saw themselves as essential brokers and providers of so-called 'Nature-Based Solutions', and saw it as a mechanism to generate carbon credits for polluting industries, thus mobilising corporate money. (9) The leader of The Nature Conservancy's NBS work, Justin Adams, said in 2015 that:

"We need to find new ways of bringing private sector actors in... The Nature Conservancy has relationships, it has land assets, it has field programmes around the world. If we can leverage all of that, then the Nature Conservancy can play a very, very important role in addressing the climate challenge". (10)

Creating a pseudo-scientific underpinning

A significant boost for the idea was the publication in October 2017 of the paper 'Natural Climate Solutions'. (11) The lead author, Bronson Griscom, and more than a third of the 32 authors of the paper, worked for The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The central and misleading claim in this paper – that 'Natural Climate Solutions' *"can provide 37% of cost-effective CO₂ mitigation needed through 2030 for a >66% chance of holding warming to below 2 °C."* - has been re-cited many times over, including at the highest policy levels, gaining plausibility through its repetition. Appearing in various forms ("37%", "one-third", "more than one third", etc.), the claim ultimately derives from the TNC paper and is often accompanied by a demand that a third of climate funding should go to NBS programmes (i.e. to conservationist groups).

Organisations such as the UN Environmental Programme and IUCN have repeated these claims as if they were real and achievable policy goals. However, the paper actually consists of entirely hypothetical calculations for *potential* carbon absorption by 'natural' ecosystems, which are based on a vast array of highly implausible or outright impossible assumptions buried in the paper's lengthy technical annex. For example, roughly half of the claimed mitigation potential comes from afforestation or re-afforestation. The land required for this, it turns out, would be nearly 800 million hectares, or roughly the size of Australia, most of it – the paper suggests - evidently in Latin America. The political, economic, social, ecological and logistical challenges and problems with such a continental-scale change in land-use are entirely ignored. The paper assumes that most of the afforestation would first have to be done by private companies for commercial crops, meaning, industrial monoculture plantations.

Constituting another quarter of the claimed mitigation potential, the paper similarly assumes that all deforestation can be stopped globally, and all wood production made sustainable almost instantaneously. However desirable such outcomes might be, decades of experience shows that this is simply not feasible. Likewise, the paper argues that much wood production would have to be

switched to plantations, which would somehow simultaneously be storing more carbon. And much of the remaining 25% of the mitigation potential would come from global changes in agricultural practices, again ignoring the huge accompanying challenges.

So-called 'Nature-Based Solutions' are largely neither 'solutions', nor 'natural'.

NBS to take centre-stage in 2021?

There are clear efforts to push NBS into the mainstream of the next UN climate negotiations, the UK-hosted UN COP-26, now scheduled for November 2021. The UK government has stated that it is one of its five priority areas for the negotiations. (12) The UN's important Standing Committee on Finance will dedicate its 2021 annual 'Forum' meeting entirely to NBS. (13) It doesn't seem to trouble the Committee that it will discuss in detail a concept which is entirely undefined within the UN system and only very vaguely defined in any terms anywhere. The Committee has received submissions of gushing support from the conservation industry, as well as numerous governments including those of France and Germany.

NBS has recently been portrayed as a unifying solution to both problems of climate change and biodiversity loss, and a parallel effort has been taking place to inject it into the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The term is included in a draft new plan called the 'Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework', which will set out the CBD's targets for the next decade and is scheduled to be adopted by the CBD in October 2021.

Given the origins of NBS, there are concerns that NBS could fund a plan by IUCN and other major conservation groups (i.e. corporations), such as WWF, to increase the cover of protected areas to 30% of the planet by 2030. This 'target', which is also a key objective for the conservation industry within both the CBD and UN climate negotiations, would potentially represent a vast grab of indigenous and community lands.

Meanwhile, 2020 saw the conservationist groups starting to win the corporate funding jackpots they have long sought. TNC, WWF, Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and other pro-NBS offset groups each received US\$100 million in funding from Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. (14)

The Emperor's NBS clothes...

Of course, little or no NBS mitigation has actually been achieved in the four years since the Griscom/TNC paper was published. The real world has seen the worst forest fires ever in many regions, huge new areas of carbon-dense peatlands have been allocated for oil exploration in Africa, and existing natural sinks such as Amazon rainforest instead becoming carbon sources. Despite the fact that its wild claims are now entirely unachievable, The Nature Conservancy has issued no re-assessment or retraction of its highly influential 2017 paper, which continues to mislead policy makers and the public. (15)

NBS represents a serious danger in perpetuating climate change, a greenwashing monster that has been unleashed and fed by self-interested conservationist groups. They should be relentlessly challenged for the damage they have done to efforts to protect the planet.

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- (1) IUCN, 2009a. [No time to lose – make full use of nature-based solutions in the post-2012 climate change regime.](#)
 - (2) IUCN, 2009b. [Natural Solutions: protected areas helping people cope with climate change.](#) IUCN-WCPA.
 - (3) IUCN, 2009b. *ibid*
 - (4) According to IUCN, 2009b, *“PACT 2020 involves a partnership led by IUCN’s World Commission on Protected Areas, together with the IUCN Secretariat, IUCN members and international organizations, including The Nature Conservancy, WWF International, the Wildlife Conservation Society, Conservation International, the Wild Foundation, Fauna and Flora International, the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Alliance, The World Bank, United Nations Development Programme and UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre.”*
 - (5) Lang and Counsell, 2019, [Offsetting fossil fuel emissions with tree planting and ‘natural climate solutions’: science, magical thinking, or pure PR?](#)
 - (6) TNC, 2016. [The Forgotten Climate Solution](#), TNC website. February 17, 2016.
 - (7) IUCN, 2016a. [Resolution at the World Conservation Congress](#), 2016. WCC-2016-Res-069-EN, Defining Nature-based Solutions.
 - (8) IUCN, 2016b. [Nature-based solutions to address climate change.](#) IUCN French Committee.
 - (9) TNC, 2016, *ibid*.
 - (10) TNC, 2016, *ibid*.
 - (11) Griscom et al. 2017. [Natural Climate Solutions](#), PNAS.
 - (12) UNFCCC, 2020a. UNFCCC, 2020. COP Presidencies Speak at Launch of Race to Zero Campaign. 05 June 2020.
 - (13) [UNFCCC](#), 2020b.
 - (14) Ecosystem Marketplace, 2020. [Natural Climate Solutions Win Big in First Bezos Grants](#)
 - (15) Elgin, B. [These Trees Are Not What They Seem](#), Bloomberg Green