

# Analysis: How to curb nature-based solutions scepticism

There are well-established systems for good NbS design, but greater transparency and a culture of accountability are needed to help guide the wider market.

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BY STEVE GILMORE

Supporters of nature-based solutions (NbS) see them — if well-designed — as an essential tool in combating climate change. Detractors see a catchall term open to abuse, providing cover for actions with damaging environmental and social outcomes.



So what can environmental consultants, as project architects, do to advance the NbS cause in a **world of distrust**<sup>1</sup>?

NbS ended up enshrined in the text of the **Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework (GBF)**<sup>2</sup>, agreed at the COP15 UN biodiversity conference in December 2022. An earlier draft had eight mentions, but these were whittled down to just two for the final agreement. These referred to their potential as a tool for meeting two of the agreement's targets: Target Eight ("minimise the impact of climate change and ocean acidification on biodiversity and increase its resilience") and Target Eleven ("restore, maintain and enhance nature's contributions to people, including ecosystem functions and services").

But even these relatively minor inclusions drew strident criticism from countries — most notably Bolivia — and campaign groups, such as the **Global Forest Coalition**<sup>3</sup> and the **Third World Network**<sup>4</sup>.

This criticism is founded on several well-publicised issues. The first is that NbS are inseparable from (and supply the market for) carbon offsets, which many campaigners see as a way to allow major polluters to continue emitting carbon and destroying the environment. Additionally, NbS and offsets, critics argue, risk violating the rights of local communities as they result in land being appropriated for projects. Other issues raised include a lack of clear definitions and standards for what constitutes NbS, opening the door to poor design and implementation.

Leaving aside objections to the fundamental concept of offsets, environmental consultants can — and do — help create NbS in a way that avoids these pitfalls. This means designing projects in concert with local communities, and ensuring clearly defined benefits, rigorous standards and sound monitoring.

"There must be a clear goal and a comprehensive operational project plan to achieve it, with inclusiveness, transparency and accountability at its core," says Mathilde Mignot, group director of nature and technology based solutions at **EcoAct**.

Standards are a key part of the process of ensuring best practice. EcoAct restricts its NbS work to projects with third-party accreditation, and which adhere to internationally recognised standards that comply with the International Carbon Reduction & Offset Alliance (ICROA)'s code of best practice.

## Guidance gap

The NbS umbrella, however, is incredibly broad, spanning everything from rainforest restoration and flood barriers to green roofing and water treatment in urban areas. This makes the task of building detailed frameworks difficult. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) published a Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions in 2020. This is a self assessment tool consisting of eight criteria and associated indicators to help with the design and scaling up of NbS. But by its very nature, a set of global criteria is going to be generalised.

"Once you get into the details of a project there are many details that are just not going to be covered by a big global standard," says Brendan Player, environmental planner and NbS expert at **Stantec**.

Player does see areas where additional guidance could be useful. "There's definitely a lack of guidance on the monitoring side of things," he says. "We really highlight to clients the need for data-driven performance on projects and the importance of having a robust inventory of ecosystem resources and functions prior to implementation."

The diversity of NbS and the complexity involved in aspects such as performance monitoring challenge the feasibility of creating guidelines both rigid and comprehensive enough to prevent poor quality projects. "This raises concerns not necessarily about NbS as a concept, but what kind of quality the wider market is willing to accept," says Player.

"What you can do is work to create a culture where people are not willing to invest in those lower quality projects," he suggests.

There are potential parallels with the carbon market, which, as Mignot notes, evolved through a continuous process of development, feedback and improvement over more than a decade. Offsetting unavoidable emissions, she says, requires "working collaboratively while building on scientific findings and continuing to improve relevant methodologies and monitoring technologies, thereby increasing the integrity and transparency of the market."

Independent project ratings agencies can be allies in the equivalent endeavours for NbS. Mignot points to agencies like **Sylvera** and **BeZero**, which are introducing new ways of monitoring and analysing projects' effectiveness across measures such as additionality, permanence, leakage and other areas. **Sylvera**<sup>5</sup>, for instance, partners with the Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool (IBAT) to assess biodiversity outcomes on projects.

## Share best practice

Player says that consultants should also advocate for making more information on best-practice NbS design publicly available.

There is no shortage of successful examples. Stantec, for example, worked on restoring **Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge**<sup>6</sup> in the Delaware Bay, using over 1 million cubic yards of sand to create a natural barrier that protects natural habitats and inland communities.

EcoAct's Mignot referred to the **Katingan Mentaya project**<sup>7</sup> in Indonesian Borneo, which used a community-based approach to preserve peatland, and which she recently visited.

But public and private sector entities considering NbS can struggle to find accessible information about, or examples of, such successful projects.

"Clients may be implementing really great projects that have really great data, but then be hesitant to put the details out," says Player. "It would be great if a lot of those examples were publicly available. That involves showing clients the value of public transparency and contributing to a culture of accountability."

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