

Carbon markets rule change would harm mitigation and Indigenous peoples



Climate change, biodiversity loss and human rights are closely linked problems, with a large number of interactions and feedbacks. In many cases, action to address one of these issues also benefits the others. But not always. In their Comment entitled ‘Additionality requirements of carbon markets could penalize Indigenous stewardship’¹, Macreadie et al. call for a rethink of a key principle that safeguards the environmental integrity of carbon markets, in order to redress historical injustices and improve equity. However, we must express concerns that, if the criterion of additionality in emission credits awarding is disregarded, net carbon emissions will increase. Thus climate change would worsen, causing ecosystem degradation and increased social inequality, with Indigenous peoples particularly at risk².

We acknowledge that carbon crediting may reward the restoration of previously degraded land, while ignoring the centuries or millennia of stewardship by Indigenous people that has maintained intact ecosystems. We further recognize that Indigenous stewardship might not be able to continue indefinitely without specific support.

In contrast to Macreadie et al., we do not consider the carbon market to be an appropriate tool to correct this situation. The fundamental purpose of carbon markets as a policy instrument is to prevent dangerous climate change, by reducing net greenhouse gas emissions as rapidly and efficiently as possible³. This is achieved by offsetting emissions in one place by removals or reductions elsewhere.

The latter need to be ‘real and additional’, as specified in all regulations of international carbon markets, from the Clean Development Mechanism under the Kyoto Protocol to Article 6 of the Paris Agreement^{4,5}.

Additionality means that emission credits cannot be generated by activities that would have happened under a business-as-usual scenario⁶. The continued existence of a natural carbon sink is therefore not additional, and new emissions cannot be ‘balanced’ if there is no actual change in other emissions from either anthropogenic or natural sources⁷.

Macreadie et al. point out that Indigenous stewardship of land and tidal wetlands frequently provides highly effective, long-term protection of natural carbon sinks and stores. We do not contest this. Supporting ongoing stewardship could protect the socio-economic and ecological services provided by vegetated coastal ecosystems, while also respecting the societal role of Indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, other policy options exist to help ensure such ecosystem protection, besides carbon markets. These options include support through public government programmes (for example, the UK’s Environmental Management Scheme⁸), private philanthropy⁹ and other non-carbon market approaches and investments, such as blue/green bonds or insurance products.

Although coastal wetlands, such as mangroves, saltmarsh and seagrass, can potentially contribute to climate change mitigation, the determination of additionality for these ecosystems is challenging, even for restoration¹⁰. Non-carbon market options are

available to support the conservation and protection of such blue carbon ecosystems. Providing carbon credits without additionality would risk increasing net carbon emissions.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.