

# DEBUNKING THE MYTHS AROUND CARBON OFFSETTING

## Myth 1: Businesses only offset because it is good for PR (so-called “greenwashing”)

Worries about climate change are growing throughout society, [particularly among the young](#). Today’s consumers and potential hires, more eco-conscious than ever, are increasingly looking to invest themselves in brands with an ethical ethos that matches their own; but in a crowded marketplace, scrutiny around “greenwashing” has never been greater. Offsetting can indeed be effective in marketing your business, but it must form part of a wider strategy that showcases real climate action and a commitment to sustainability.

A recent [study conducted in 2020 by IBM](#) found that ‘almost six in ten consumers are willing to change their purchasing habits to help reduce negative environmental impact’. By following WLT’s **Measure, Reduce, Balance** methodology, you’ll be taking significant steps towards reducing your environmental impact before your first offset has been purchased – an excellent corporate social responsibility (CSR) story that will demonstrate your credentials and put paid to any greenwashing claims.

In 2020, the Advertising Standards Association [announced a renewed focus](#) on the regulation of false environmental claims. While an environmental strategy has the potential to bring in new customers to your business, a misstep in messaging could have the opposite effect and do lasting harm to your reputation. To ensure your messaging is always accurate and transparent, you can find lots of information on the Carbon Balanced website that will help guide you through terms like carbon neutral and net zero.

## Myth 2: Carbon capture technologies are a more effective solution than carbon offsetting

Technologies do exist that can capture carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, or directly from factories, and sequester it in a safe place – [deep underground](#), for example. Such technologies will likely play an important role in our response to climate change in the coming decades, but at present they are expensive, energy-intensive, and operating at far too small a scale to have a significant impact on the global climate. Many ambitious projects, like Norway’s Project Longship, are either under construction or remain in the planning stage.

In 2020, the Earth’s average temperature [rose to 1.2 °C above pre-industrial levels](#) for the first time; if it exceeds 1.5°C by 2030, scientists warn that a [climate catastrophe awaits](#). With time running out to steer the world away from this fate, we must prioritise the most effective, large-scale solution to the harmful effects of climate change that is available to us: the protection of standing forests.

Protecting forests is prudent not only for their carbon capture and storage (CCS) capacity. When trees are cut down, stored carbon is released back into the atmosphere, at a scale that negates any advances made by the world’s burgeoning CCS technologies (deforestation accounts for 10-20% of all annual greenhouse gas emissions).

The most responsible way to address your organisation’s environmental impact is to act now, rather than anticipate the development of new technologies or wait for existing ones to expand to a scale at which they are currently unproven. Reduce your emissions at source as much as possible, then offset your unavoidable residual emissions through the protection of existing CCS solutions – i.e. the carbon-rich tropical forests within WLT’s Carbon Balanced projects.



### Myth 3: Businesses only offset to avoid reducing their emissions directly

WLT only work with businesses that are committed to making offsetting part of a long-term strategy to reduce their impact on the environment, which includes reducing emissions directly. Reaching an accurate assessment of your impact on the planet can be a complex and difficult task, but thanks to WLT's Carbon Calculator, you can now **Measure**, **Reduce** and **Balance** your organisation's carbon footprint in just a few simple steps.

At the **Measure** stage, it is important to factor in the emissions you are directly and indirectly responsible for, including those in your supply chain, which are likely to make up the largest part of your footprint. To **Reduce** your emissions at source, you can follow a number of pathways, including efficiency measures, stakeholder engagement, renewable energy, and investments in business transformation.

When it comes time to **Balance** your emissions by purchasing offsets, you may choose to offset your entire organisational footprint or just a part of it, as you work towards a goal of carbon neutral, net zero or climate positive. To effectively combat climate change, we ask all Carbon Balanced supporters to reduce their unavoidable emissions, and thus the amount they offset, year on year. The Carbon Balanced team will help to monitor this with you and address factors that may increase emissions, such as business growth and acquisitions.

### Myth 4: Offsetting projects interfere with local and Indigenous land rights

To address this myth, it is worth looking at the concept of "Global North" and "Global South", which groups countries not by geographical location but by socioeconomic and political characteristics. The Global North includes places like Western Europe, the United States and Australia, while the Global South is made up of Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia and others.

Because countries in the Global South tend to be less industrialised than those in the Global North, it is often cheaper to establish offsetting projects in the former. This is one reason why most offsetting projects are today found in the Global South, where a much greater proportion of the population are Indigenous, lead a subsistence lifestyle, and/or are reliant on small-scale agriculture for survival. The land rights of these peoples should always be addressed first when an organisation is looking to set up a new offsetting project.

Over the course of 30+ years, WLT have shown time and again that conservation projects can bring benefits not just to biodiversity, but to local communities as well. We know that attaining official protection for a parcel of land is not enough – the protected status may restrict Indigenous peoples from entering their traditional territory or otherwise impinge upon the needs of a local community.

To avoid these outcomes, we always work in concert with our in-country partners who meet face-to-face with the people living on or near the land we aim to protect. Through our Carbon Balanced projects, local communities receive the support they need to develop sustainable livelihoods, pursue educational opportunities, and play a leading role in the conservation of their land. Below are just a few examples of the work being funded by Carbon Balanced supporters:

- **Conservation Coast, Guatemala:** Improving access to healthcare and education for local women and girls in one of Guatemala's poorest regions.
- **Khe Nuoc Trong, Vietnam:** Teaching sustainable forest management to community members once involved in illegal timber harvesting.
- **Nangaritza Valley, Ecuador:** Working to establish a new reserve for the indigenous Shuar people, protecting their ancestral territory from the threat of mining.
- **Xilitla, Mexico:** Preserving the traditional ejido system of land tenure and offering payments to local residents in exchange for protecting their forest home.



## Myth 5: Offsets lack the necessary climate impact because they are not regulated

WLT's Carbon Balanced projects have been designed according to the robust and internationally recognised Climate, Community & Biodiversity Alliance (CCBA) standard to ensure they deliver REDD+ outcomes (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) while contributing to Science-Based Targets (SBTs), the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) - all important parts of the net zero journey.

We provide two main choices for offsetting. The first is our project in Guatemala, which is externally certified to the Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) and the Climate, Community & Biodiversity (CCB) standard. Offsetting here will provide you with Verified Carbon Units (VCUs). The second choice is WLT's own self-certified projects, where the smaller scale of these projects makes it uneconomic to undertake third-party verification and where WLT certifies the carbon, biodiversity, and community benefits that the project is supporting.

In both cases, projects are rigorously monitored to ensure they account for "additionality". To be classified as "additional", it must be proved that the project's emission reduction or avoidance activities would not have occurred in the absence of the project. Steps must also be taken to ensure the project does not displace deforestation or forest degradation (e.g. illegal logging) to another area. Finally, both WLT and Verra maintain offset registries to avoid the same offset being sold to multiple buyers, thereby ensuring all emissions are offset appropriately.

## Myth 6: Planting trees is one of the most effective ways to fight climate change

It can take 20 years or more for a tree to grow large enough to store carbon. This is time we simply do not have - according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), some changes to Earth's climate [have already become "irreversible"](#). Tree-planting certainly has an important role to play in our response to the climate crisis, but the urgency with which we need to respond means we must prioritise the protection of well-established, pre-standing primary forests.

If we are to limit the rise in global temperature to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels - as outlined in the Paris Agreement - the UN Environment Programme has stated that [global emissions must fall by 55% by 2030](#). This target can only be achieved if we tackle deforestation, which releases stored carbon into the atmosphere, accounting for 10-20% of all annual greenhouse gas emissions - more than every car, boat and plane combined.

In 2021, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and Botanic Gardens Conservation International set out [10 golden rules for tree-planting](#) - tellingly, #1 on the list is to protect standing forests first. Restoring degraded forest areas (reforestation) is always preferable to establishing new plantations (afforestation); additional factors include selecting the right tree species and putting local people at the heart of tree-planting projects, which WLT do through our Plant a Tree programme.

While scientists believe tree-planting has a ["mind-blowing" potential](#) to tackle the climate crisis, the fact remains that protecting carbon-rich habitats, like the tropical forests in our Carbon Balanced projects, is absolutely essential. [Research suggests](#) that avoiding deforestation and forest degradation would reduce annual carbon emissions by about 1 gigatonne (Gt), while natural forest regrowth could account for another 2-4 Gt of carbon removals.

Do you have any other questions about carbon offsetting? Tell us at [info@worldlandtrust.org](mailto:info@worldlandtrust.org)