

Strengthening Biodiversity Certification

TRANSCRIPT

Biodiversity certification delivers better environmental outcomes from urban development, at lower cost.

By ensuring that conservation issues are considered early in the planning process, new urban areas will 'improve or maintain' biodiversity values.

This means that areas of high conservation value are identified and protected, and, that any clearing or loss of other habitat is offset.

Where certification is conferred for development areas, it 'switches off' the requirement for Development Applications to address biodiversity issues.

This saves time and money for landowners and local government. It speeds up land release, and improves housing affordability.

At the moment, each Development Application requires assessment of impacts on biodiversity and threatened species. This adds to the cost of every subdivision, every housing development, and every infrastructure project.

If this hypothetical area was to be re-zoned for development, each of these projects would require such an assessment. The environmental outcomes from this approach are scattered, uncertain, and inconsistent.

Wouldn't it be better if the environmental approval happened for the whole development area, at the time of re-zoning?

Environmentally sensitive areas could be identified and avoided up-front, impacts on less sensitive areas could be offset, and it would reduce development costs.

Importantly, certification will ensure that biodiversity values are 'improved or maintained'.

"Improve or maintain" is defined by objective assessment standards contained in the "certification methodology". It means that losses from clearing are offset by achieving real gains in the condition and habitat value of vegetation.

Here's how it works....

First, a planning authority proposes an area for certification.

In this hypothetical example, the assessment area is just over 2,100 hectares, and it would have been identified in a Government-endorsed State or regional planning strategy. A planning authority would prepare an application for this area, using the assessment standards.

Second, they identify the environmental values of the area. To start, the vegetation of the Assessment Area is mapped. In this example, 37%, or about 800 hectares, is vegetated.

On this map, all areas of 'high biodiversity value' are identified.

These areas include

- Endangered Ecological Communities, and 'over-cleared vegetation types'
- The verified locations of some threatened species
- State and Regional Corridors, and...
- Vegetation along rivers and creeks.

These areas of high biodiversity value are termed 'red flag areas', and are shown here in red.

Other constraints, such as steep and flood-prone lands are also mapped, and included in the areas that might be protected.

Now, an assessment of each area of high biodiversity value is undertaken, to determine which are feasible to protect over the long-term.

This assessment considers the conservation significance and viability of these patches, and whether it is practical to avoid impact.

The Planning Authority can propose that areas not feasible to protect can be added to the development footprint, provided they are fully offset.

A draft map is produced, showing

- the areas proposed to be certified and developed (shown here in green), and
- the areas proposed to be retained from development (shown here in red)

Nearly a quarter of the development footprint is vegetated, and the clearing of this vegetation needs to be offset.

Over half of all the vegetation, and nearly 90% of the high conservation value vegetation, is outside the development footprint. These areas will not be cleared, and can be used to offset the impacts of development.

Offsetting is not merely setting land aside from development.

It is about permanently protecting these lands, and improving their conservation values through a clear management plan.

The current condition of an offset site is assessed. In this example, a woodland has been invaded by African Olive, and there is a low diversity of native plant and animal species.

By implementing a management plan, threats to the site are controlled, the condition of the site improves, and species diversity can recover.

Here, a management plan has been implemented over a number of years, and the habitat is now in excellent condition, with high species diversity.

It's not the area of an offset site ... but the gain in condition, and gain in habitat value, that offsets clearing.

Offsets can be secured in a number of ways.

Here, one landowner has agreed to sell part of their property to the National Parks and Wildlife Service, shown in brown.

In the areas shown as orange, landowners or the Council will agree to enter into a Bio-banking Agreement. For this, they will receive a payment for selling credits, and annual funds for management of the property.

In the areas shown in blue, landowners or the Council have agreed to enter into either Voluntary Conservation Agreements, or Nature Conservation Trust Agreements, or conservation Property Vegetation Plans.

In areas shown as yellow, some credit is available on the basis of a proposed environmental zoning. As zoning does not provide permanent protection, these offsets are heavily discounted.

These proposed actions will help to offset the clearing of the development footprint.

If the proposed conservation measures inside the Assessment Area do not fully meet the offset requirement, the planning authority can either

- re-configure the development footprint to reduce the amount of clearing, or,
- identify additional offset sites outside the Assessment Area

In our hypothetical example, offsets are required outside the Assessment Area. This offset requirement can be translated into a financial contribution.

This financial contribution would be used to purchase or manage offset sites, by entering into agreements with landowners, or in some cases, dedicating land to National Park

In this example, the funds would enable the purchase of credits from the landowners of these Bio-bank sites, adjacent to a National Park.

And in this example, the funds would enable these landowners to enter into conservation Property Vegetation Plans with the Catchment Management Authority.

The scale and type of all offsets will be agreed at the time the biodiversity certification proposal is approved and they will be secured as the development proceeds.

The planning authority can now demonstrate that the proposed conservation measures, inside and outside the Assessment Area, improve or maintain biodiversity values.

On this basis, the Minister may certify the lands identified as the development footprint. These areas would then not require further biodiversity assessment.

Biodiversity Certification provides greater certainty for landowners and developers, and reduces the time and cost of environmental assessment.

It also delivers regional conservation priorities – protecting and connecting significant areas, delivering a network of conservation lands that are viable for the long term.