
[‘Nature-based Solutions’ and Corporate Territorial Control: A Fabricated Consensus](#)

The mining sector seeks to gain legitimacy and expand its frontiers of accumulation and territorial control. It does so using a discourse of sustainability and by investing in so-called “nature-based solutions,” to suggest that its ongoing extraction is “offset.” This article exposes the case of mining companies Vale and BHP Billiton.

It is nothing new that States and the business sector misappropriate environmental issues; this has led to the creation of seemingly good concepts that claim to have the best intentions, but whose purpose is to serve corporate interests and justify interventions in, and control of, territories in the Global South. Dominant knowledge, developed by ‘experts’ from Northern countries, promotes a certain way of perceiving nature. This knowledge, which is aligned with political and corporate interests from the North and South, is considered to be both neutral and unanimously accepted when it comes to environmental issues. It establishes what the problem is, what must be done to solve it, and who is responsible. Narratives of an alien, untameable or out-of-control nature—requiring specialists’ knowledge in order to be controlled—have led to the development of policies based on market logic and the idea that it is possible to “offset” emissions and destruction.

There is currently a lack of commitment around halting the expansion of extractive industries, which historically have been shown not only to generate CO₂ emissions, but also to cause environmental crimes and human rights violations. It is within this context that the idea of ‘nature-based solutions’ has emerged (NBS). Large oil companies, such as Shell, Chevron, BP and Petrobras, as well as large mining companies like BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto, Glencore and Vale, are most vested in this idea. They also have the legislative, financial and ideological support of States.

The conservationist organization, IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), introduced the idea of Nature-based Solutions (NBS) into the ‘environmental vocabulary’ in 2016. Different actors use this concept frequently with different meanings, including in proposals that range from REDD+ mechanisms (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), to carbon capture and sequestration technology and other geoengineering techniques (1). The idea progressed until it was incorporated into the language of various United Nations organizations and conventions. For example, the 2015 Paris Agreement, which does not define a particular emissions reduction target for the energy and transport sectors, establishes the possibility of achieving “a balance between anthropogenic emissions by source and removals by sinks” in the second half of the century (2). This language has given rise to the concept of ‘net zero emissions,’ by claiming that carbon sequestration will be able to offset the emissions generated by burning fossil fuels.

In 2012, the International Finance Corporation (IFC)—the private arm of the World Bank—introduced the use of offsets to argue that there would be no net loss in biodiversity in the projects it financed. Since then, the institution has promoted biodiversity offsets, which “not only can, but must, lead to a net positive impact.” To this end, it contends that biodiversity offsets—that is, quantifiable conservation outcomes deriving from actions designed to offset a project’s significant adverse impacts on biodiversity—must follow the ‘like-for-like or better’ principle. Offsets must conserve the

same biodiversity values that are being impacted by the project (3). As if this were possible...

Corporate appropriation: The case of mining

One sector that deserves to be highlighted in this discussion, along with oil companies, is the mining sector. Using a discourse of sustainability, the mining sector seeks to legitimize its activities and expand its frontiers of accumulation and territorial control. We have seen this industry increase its investments in so-called nature-based solutions in order to offset its ongoing extraction of 'natural resources.' For example, Vale—the second largest mining company in the world after BHP Billiton, and leading iron ore producer—has committed to investing at least USD 2 billion to reduce its carbon emissions by 33% by 2030, as part of its commitment to become 'carbon neutral' by 2050, and to achieve no net loss in biodiversity in the long term (4). To be 'carbon neutral' means to calculate the total emissions of a project and use offset projects to counterbalance the emissions that cannot be reduced.

These actions are an essential part of Vale's legitimation strategy; it uses them to claim that it offsets the negative impacts of mining extraction, exploitation and transportation. "We protect, and help protect, an area approximately six times greater than the area occupied by our operations," says the mining giant. It also contends that "Vale has been protecting the Amazon rainforest for decades, while operating the largest iron ore mine in the world." The company maintains that while almost the entire area around its operations in the Carajás mine in Pará, Brazil was deforested in the last 30 years, only the area that Vale "helps protect" remained intact. This same company has been denounced for engendering conflicts in various countries, such as Malaysia, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, Argentina, Colombia, Peru and Canada (5). In Brazil, in addition to conflictive projects like the Grande Carajás Program in the states of Pará and Maranhão (the Amazon forest that Vale claims to protect), the company is responsible for the collapse of the Mina do Feijão dam in Brumadinho. This occurred three years after the collapse of the Fundão dam in Brazil, which destroyed an area the size of Portugal.

The Fundão dam belongs to the Samarco mining company, which is owned by Vale in partnership with BHP Billiton. Five years after the disaster, none of the repairs planned for the group of affected people—which includes farmers, washerwomen, artisans, fishermen, fisherwomen and small merchants—have been completed, nor has the environment been restored. The disaster killed 19 people and destroyed the sources of livelihood of almost two million people living along the Doce River basin, whom the 43.8 million cubic meters of iron ore waste reached in 39 affected municipalities in Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo. Serious environmental racism also characterized this crime, as it disproportionately affected the black population of the region: For example, in the district of Bento Rodrigues, which was the area most affected by the waste, 84.3% of the population is black. The perpetrators of this murder have not been prosecuted and remain free. To make matters worse, BHP was not found guilty in its country of origin, England; this was in response to the collective lawsuit that included almost 200,000 individuals, as well as prefectures, small businesses and the Krenak indigenous community. The judge determined that the lawsuit was 'abusive,' and that England had no jurisdiction over the case (6).

Yet, what is abusive is that BHP has also profited from the creation of the NBS market. Since 2016, this company has generated products by incorporating so-called environmental justifications. In alliance with Conservation International, it developed forest bonds to finance REDD projects—bonds which the IFC newly issued at a value of USD 152 million (7). Also, in 2008, BHP supported a REDD project managed by Conservation International (CI) in Peru. The Alto Mayo project, which involves communities of more than 5,000 people, was accused of 'carbon colonialism,' because it

delegitimized and violated the traditional ways of life of communities that depend on the territory where the 'standing forest' is located. This forest, 'intact,' generates carbon and lucrative offset possibilities (8). More recently, CI and BHP created the "Finance for Forests" initiative (F4f) to expand these kinds of investments. The initiative involves the most predatory and polluting industries: oil, gas, mining and aviation.

BHP also participates in the "Markets for Natural Climate Solutions" initiative (NCS). This initiative is spearheaded by the "International Emissions Trade Association" (IETA), which includes Chevron, BP, Shell, and others. For these corporations, nature-based solutions are "one of the most economical ways to manage CO₂" and to meet the Paris Agreement targets. However, they are also one more way to expand the power and reach of the already problematic carbon markets.

NBS: Solutions so that nothing really has to change

These initiatives enable companies to convey the notion that their activities protect and create biodiversity, rather than destroy it. They make sure that extractive capitalism is seen not as a cause of environmental problems, but as the solution. Companies use these initiatives to encroach upon communities' territories, claiming that it is possible—using dangerous and costly technologies and practices—to offset the unprecedented damage they cause. Thus, in addition to hiding the root of the problems, conflicts, crimes and human rights violations suffered by communities, these initiatives increase the already strong economic, political and cultural presence of companies, granting them legitimacy in society. This means expanding and intensifying the usurpation and private appropriation of lands and territories, and the violation of the food security and sovereignty of communities and peoples who live and survive thanks to their relationship with their territories.

Nature-based solutions presume consensus on the idea that we are all responsible for the environmental crisis. And therefore, because 'everybody' is responsible, in fact nobody is. The "techno-managerial eco-consensus maintains that we need radical change, but within the framework of the current situation [...] so that nothing really has to change" in the capitalist system (9). Problems are not solved, but rather moved to another place. Sustainability discourse around the use of natural resources is once again used to promote the image of a corporate sector that is concerned and committed to fighting climate change and poverty. The exclusive focus of environmental policies on offset-based concepts, such as 'carbon neutral' or 'zero emissions or net impact'—which have now been redesigned based on the idea that "nature holds the solution,"—represents a reductionist and depoliticized perception of the environmental problem. For whom is the solution, and what does it solve? And what nature are we talking about?

Focused on measurement and quantification, as well as technological adjustments as a goal, these processes provide capitalism with one more opportunity to appropriate discourse that is critical of the system—in this case discourse about environmental destruction—and thus generate new sources of accumulation and legitimation. These processes are developed and implemented using a power structure that involves scientific groups, the corporate sector, governments, big conservation organizations, multilateral financial institutions and UN agencies, such as the Convention on Climate Change and Biodiversity. The strategy now is not to deny the harmful nature of industrial extraction, but to recognize it and claim that it is possible to offset—in order to get ahead in the race for 'environmental resources.'

However, it is clearly impossible to offset the negative effects of extractive capitalism. And even if it were possible, there is not enough land on the planet for the number of projects that are being proposed. That land, that territory, is already occupied. It is not possible to expand fossil fuel

production and mining, or to increase agribusiness productivity, while utilizing these same sectors to combat climate change or guarantee environmental protection. In practice, we have seen that constantly prioritizing the extractivist model, the logic of extraction-exportation of goods, colonialism and neocolonialism, and racism and patriarchy leads to the expropriation of bodies-territories and traditional, indigenous and peasant communities—especially in the Global South. It is a process that creates new territorial configurations which allow for the intervention in, and appropriation and use of, territories.

It is therefore necessary to reflect on the following questions: What are the concrete effects of these processes on territories, ways of life, and the ways in which we perceive and relate to the environment? What problems are we actually trying to solve when we talk about ‘nature-based solutions?’ Are we talking about the environment for communities, for people who actually protect it and show us that another, non-capitalist, way of life is possible? Or are we talking about the environment for business, death and destruction? The current coronavirus pandemic is one more element that can help us answer this...

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- (1) [See here](#) for more information.
- (2) UNFCCC. [Paris Agreement](#). 2015, p. 4. Accessed December 2020.
- (3) IFC, [International Finance Corporation, Guidance Note 6: Biodiversity conservation and sustainable management of living natural resources](#). 2019.
- (4) VALE. [Sustainability. Carbon Neutral](#). 2020. Accessed November 2020.
- (5) [International articulation of those affected by Vale](#). Unsustainability Report. 2015. Accessed March 2021.
- (6) For more information, [see the Movement of Dam Affected People](#).
- (7) CI. [Conservation International – BP Alliance](#). 2021. Accessed March 2021.
- (8) For more information, see REDD-Monitor, [Carbon colonialism in the Alto Mayo REDD project in Peru. An interview with Lauren Gifford on Earth Watch](#)
- (9) SWYNGEDOUW, Erik. Apocalypse Forever? Post-political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change. *Theory, Culture & Society*. SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore. Vol. 27, n. 2-3, 2010. p. 213-232, p. 3.