

The development of the EPBC Act offsets assessment guide

And the many benefits of bridging the science-policy divide

By Martine Maron (University of Queensland) and Phil Gibbons (ANU)

I spy an outcome

To highlight the many contributions our research is making towards conservation outcomes, *Decision Point* is running a series of short stories on what we have achieved. In this instalment Martine Maron and Phil Gibbons talk about the creation of the offsets assessment guide for the Department of the Environment and the additional co-benefits that have been generated through the collaboration.

Environmental offsetting involves compensating for environmental damage at one location by generating ecologically equivalent gains at another. The aim is that there is 'no net loss'. Offsets are increasingly being used as a regulatory tool to balance sustainable development and environmental conservation. Unfortunately, such schemes are often prone to failure due to poor design and implementation.

When the Department of the Environment introduced the new EPBC Act environmental offsets policy, collaboration with the NERP Environmental Decisions Hub was key to avoiding these pitfalls. The Department was faced with an enormous challenge – designing a transparent, simple-to-use, yet rigorous approach to decision-making around offsets. The approach had to give effect to the principles of the policy, while being flexible enough to support decisions about offsetting impacts on threatened species and ecological communities, and many types of possible impacts.

The Department of the Environment approached the NERP ED Hub to help advise on the development of a tool to give effect to the principles outlined in the new policy and take into account feedback from broader consultation. NERP researchers were able to draw from ten years of research in this area and the existing collaborative relationship with the Department of the Environment to develop this tool.

The offsets assessment guide is a major innovation in environmental impact assessment under the EPBC Act. It allows a judgement to be made on whether an offset meets the 'improve or maintain' test for impacts on nationally threatened species and ecological communities (see the box below). It is the first tool in operation in any jurisdiction worldwide that explicitly and transparently accounts for additionality, uncertainty, and time lags in calculating an offset requirement.

However, it should be noted that the outcomes of this collaboration reach well beyond the offsets assessment guide. They include:

- the involvement of a NERP PhD student, Megan Evans (who collaborated on the development of the Assessment Guide)



Pictured above (from the left) are Phil Gibbons (EDG), James Tresize (Department of the Environment) and Michael Mulvaney (ACT Government). The trio are leading a field class of third year biodiversity conservation students on how to use the offsets assessments guide – a hands-on session of how you might calculate an offset for a proposed development of habitat for the threatened striped legless lizard.

working as a placement in the Department of the Environment to continue to develop offsets evaluation frameworks and processes.

- A collaborative paper led jointly by Department of the Environment staff & NERP researchers entitled: 'Bridging the Science-Policy Divide through Collaboration: The Development of the Australian Environmental Offsets Policy' (currently in review at *Environmental Conservation*).
- Department of the Environment staff involvement in undergraduate teaching on the topic of offsets assessment (at the ANU in a course on biodiversity conservation).
- International attention on the approach being developed in Australia; especially in terms of European policy development.
- IUCN benefiting from the experience through the membership of NERP researcher Phil Gibbons on their offsets technical working group.

The success of this project highlights the value of the relationships that the NERP program has fostered over time between academia and government. Reflecting on the development of the offsets assessment guide, the Director of the Department's Sustainability Research and Science Policy Section, Dave Johnson, summed it up like this: "Having dedicated people that see the strategic issues and are prepared to engage in an ongoing dialogue over the long term – that's not just a nice thing to have – it's the clincher for genuine collaboration and standout success."

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The first step

The first step in any offset scheme design is to define the objective. The EPBC Act environmental offsets policy aims to ensure that offsets 'improve or maintain' the viability of the protected matter that is impacted. The policy also requires that offsets target the particular threatened species or community that is affected: so a loss of black-throated finch habitat cannot be traded for a gain in cassowary habitat, for example.