

The nature-positive goal and the mitigation hierarchy

September 2025

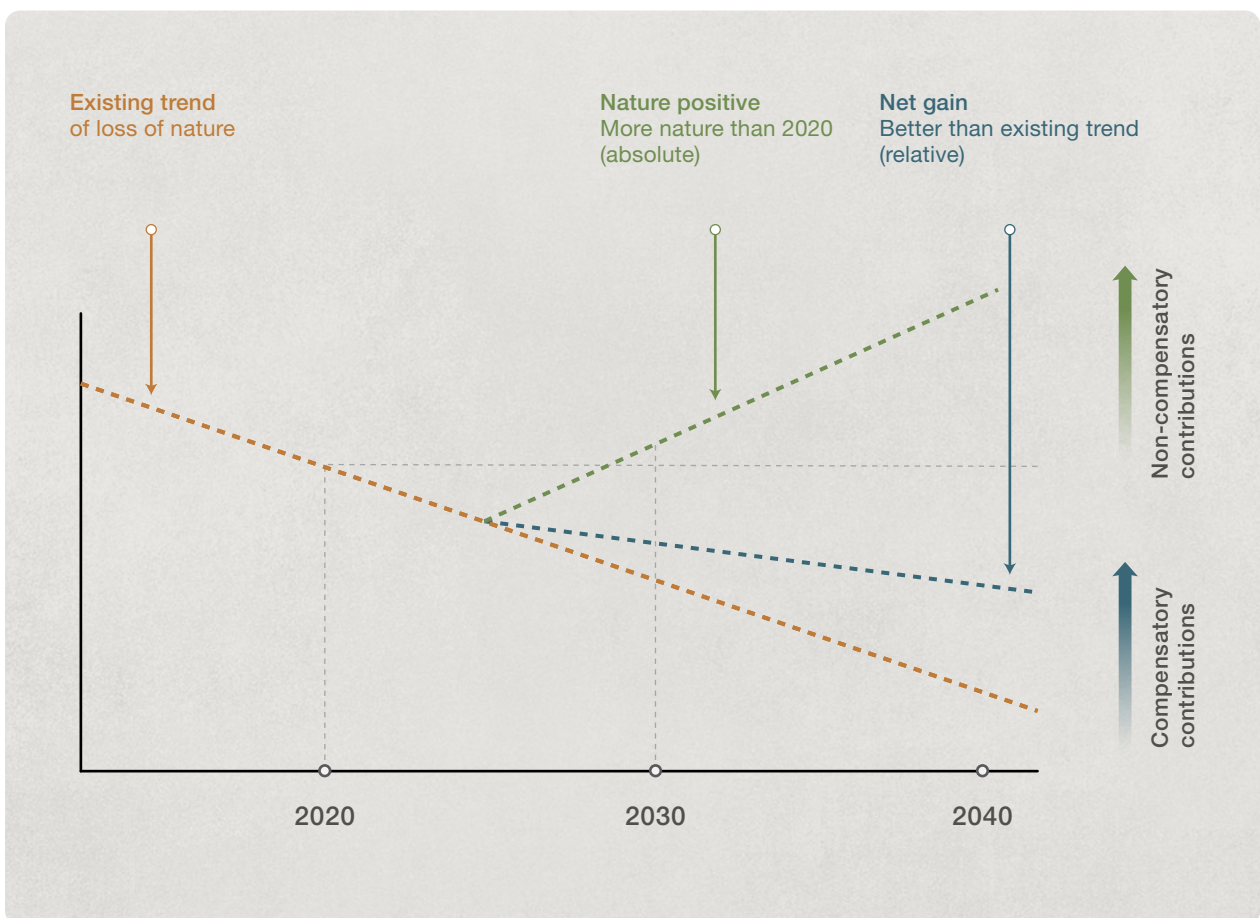


Summary

- Nature positive is a global societal goal to ensure that there is more nature in the world by 2030 than there was in 2020, and to continue a positive trend of recovery beyond that.
- Misinterpretations of the nature-positive goal risk diverting attention from efforts to reduce negative impacts to the environment, by allowing organisations to simply 'do good for nature' without first mitigating the adverse impacts of their activities.
- To prevent misuse of the nature-positive goals, commitments should be grounded in a thorough application of the mitigation hierarchy for projects and across the value chain.
- Applying the mitigation hierarchy can help organisations to identify the set of *compensatory contributions* at project and value chain level, and *non-compensatory contributions* that go above and beyond.
- Doing so will help organisations deliver genuine nature-positive contributions and communicate their actions in a responsible manner, aligned with science.

Biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented rate, posing a risk to the functioning of our societies and economies. The decline is due to a combination habitat loss, degradation, unsustainable land use, invasive species, and climate change. There is growing recognition of the need for a whole-of-society approach to halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity, with bold commitments that go beyond compensating for the impacts of developments.

Nature positive is a global societal goal of ‘halting and reversing nature loss by 2030 from a 2020 *baseline*, and achieving full recovery by 2050, through measurable gains in the health, abundance, diversity and resilience of species, ecosystems and nature processes’ (Nature Positive Initiative, 2024). It is an absolute goal to gain more nature, measured against a fixed baseline year of 2020. The broad term ‘nature’ covers biodiversity, water, climate, and soil. It goes beyond just reducing the rate of loss, hoping to reverse losses and achieve positive gains that will benefit human and planetary well-being. The process of achieving the nature-positive goal involves national, regional and local governments, indigenous people and local communities, civil society organisations and scientists.



Adapted from Maron (2023)

The mitigation hierarchy supports nature-positive contributions

For more than two decades, the mitigation hierarchy has been used to address harm to biodiversity from development projects. It is widely embedded in the environmental impact assessment policies of governments, financiers and companies around the world. **The mitigation hierarchy** is a tool that comprises four actions that are designed to be implemented in order, first (1) avoid impacts, then (2) minimise impacts, (3) rehabilitate or restore, and finally, only after these steps are exhausted, (4) offset any residual impacts. Not all impacts can be offset, especially those on irreplaceable biodiversity. In which case the project should not go ahead.



The aim of the mitigation hierarchy is to achieve a minimum of no net loss, or preferably net gain, of biodiversity. No net loss means that the biodiversity impact is fully balanced by the mitigation measures (avoid, minimise, restore, offset), so that no loss remains. Net gain (or net positive impact) is when additional compensatory measures result in a gain that exceeds the losses caused by human activities. These terms are usually used for direct impacts on biodiversity at the project level. They are relative, so the gains or losses are compared against the degree of biodiversity impact. Usually, no net loss is focused on direct impacts at site level and does not tackle the wider historical, cumulative, or indirect impacts of developments, nor impacts across a value chain.

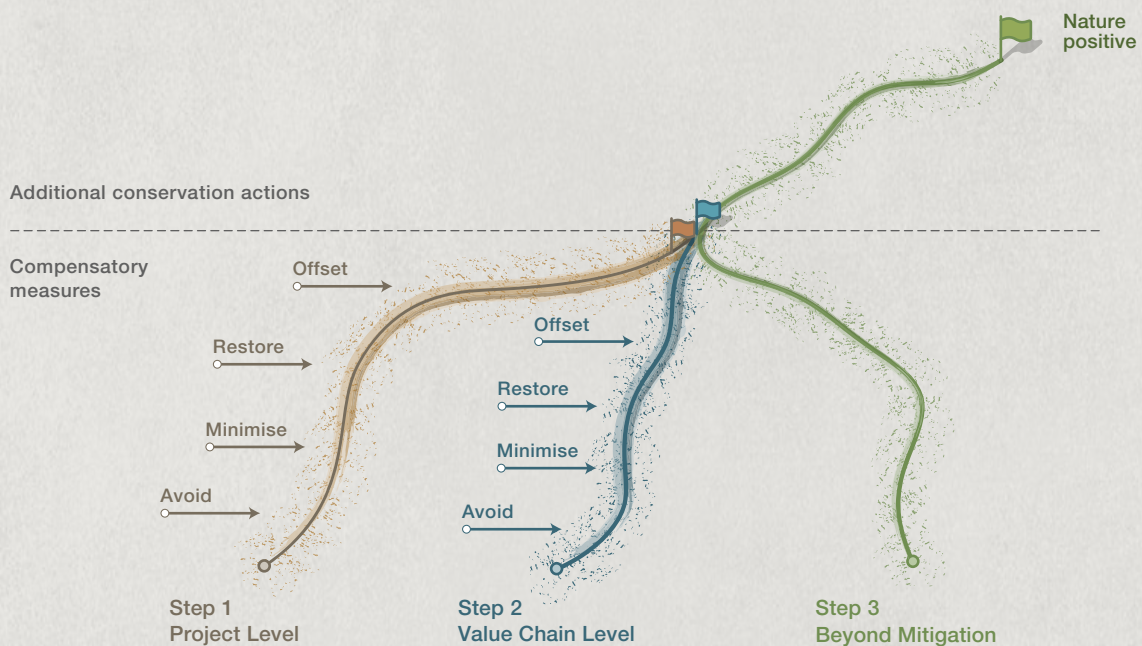
For this reason, an **extended mitigation hierarchy** (or conservation hierarchy) has been suggested, that is inspired by the mitigation hierarchy but is framed at broader levels for more general action against biodiversity loss not tied to a specific project. It also has four consecutive steps, which are similar to the previous hierarchy, but applied to a landscape and societal level: (1) refraining from causing negative impacts, (2) reducing the impacts that are caused, (3) restoring impacted nature, and (4) offsets and renewing our relationship with nature through proactive conservation actions. Nature Positive requires action at the broader landscape level.

The full implementation of the mitigation hierarchy (and its extended form) is key for identifying actions to be counted as nature-positive contributions. If extended and applied at different scales, sectors, stakeholders, and realms, the mitigation hierarchy could provide clarity to the steps to be followed to contribute genuinely to the global nature-positive goals. To avoid misusing the nature positive goals as greenwashing, it is important that other conservation actions do not replace thorough application of the mitigation hierarchy, and that they are additional to existing efforts to mitigate impacts.



Nature Positive: A global goal for 2030 and beyond

Let's ensure that there is more nature in the world by 2030 than in 2020.



Step 1 – Project Level	Step 2 – Value Chain Level	Step 3 – Beyond Mitigation – Towards Nature Positive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply mitigation hierarchy [Avoid -> Minimise -> Restore -> Offset (only the residual impact)]. • Address both direct and indirect impacts at project level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage impacts across the entire value chain. • Always prioritise avoidance first, but specially at this step. • Recognise that like-for-like compensation can be specially challenging at this scale. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver additional conservation actions only after careful application of Step 1 and Step 2. • Additional conservation actions are benefits for nature and not compensation for project impacts.

Nature Positive requires responsibility first, then recovery. Ground actions in mitigation hierarchy to ensure lasting impact for nature.

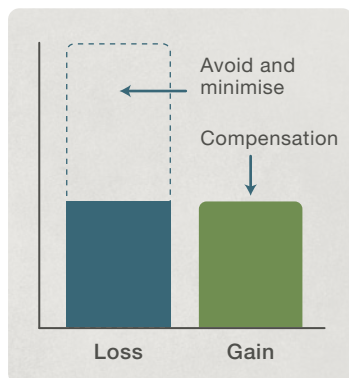
First: Compensatory measures at the project level



The first step in achieving the nature-positive goal is to address all direct and indirect impacts at the project level. A careful and thorough application of the mitigation hierarchy – informed by environmental and social impact assessment and meaningful stakeholder engagement – is necessary to achieving the nature-positive goals. When impacts are anticipated on species at risk of extinction or ecosystems at risk of collapse, avoidance or prevention of impacts is the only acceptable mitigation option. The accumulation of uncompensated impacts on threatened biodiversity owing to inadequate mitigation is not compatible with nature positive. Biodiversity offsets – when appropriate – should meet the requirements for additionality, equivalence and permanence.

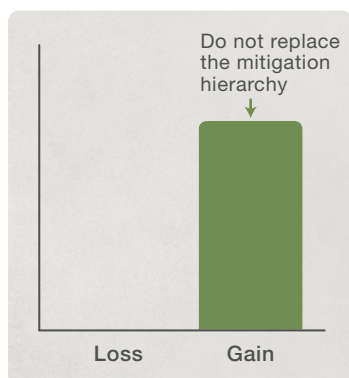
→ **Biodiversity offsets** are measurable ecological outcomes resulting from actions designed to compensate for residual adverse impacts caused by project development, as the last step in the mitigation hierarchy. The goal of biodiversity offsets is to achieve no net loss and preferably a net gain of biodiversity. Principles for offsets are well defined in the IUCN Policy on Biodiversity Offsets.

Next: Compensatory measures in the value chain



The second step in achieving the nature-positive goal is to address all cumulative and indirect impacts throughout the value chain that fall under a company’s sphere of influence through mitigation efforts. Impacts here should also be avoided, minimised, and unavoidable losses should be fully compensated. Like-for-like compensation can be more challenging for value chain impacts, as most companies have imperfect visibility of their value chains. Identifying options for avoidance is all the more important. Compensatory actions should be as closely linked to the biodiversity that is affected as possible, instead of relying on generic biodiversity credits.

Then: Other, non-compensatory measures



Only after the comprehensive application of the mitigation hierarchy at both project and value-chain level, do additional investments contribute to the nature-positive goal. Nature-positive claims can only be credible after project and value chain impacts have been mitigated. Additional conservation actions are positive actions for nature, which do not compensate for project impacts. They should preferably be focussed on ecosystems that are of high value and difficult to restore, rather than common and easy to restore ecosystems. The non-compensatory step is where there is the greatest potential for conservation philanthropy or well-designed biodiversity credits to play a part in achieving the global nature-positive goal.

References and useful information

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