Earth Day 2023: green or greenwashed?

Carbon offsets have a terrible track record.

A mountain of research an investigations have shown that in most cases, offsets don’t actually reduce greenhouse gas emissions. And yet companies keep using offsets so they can proclaim themselves “carbon neutral” without necessarily reducing their pollution.

Most offsets are tied to tree-planting schemes, and the idea is that the trees will capture carbon dioxide to cancel out some of a company’s emissions. But these initiatives can cause more harm than good if tree plantations mow over natural landscapes or displace local communities. Even if the right kinds of seedlings are planted in appropriate places, they might not survive long enough to make a dent in climate change.

Maybe to avoid the bad rap these kinds of offsets have gotten, Apple calls them “high-quality, nature-based carbon removal projects” in a recent announcement ahead of Earth Day. Apple’s expanding a fund to try to restore forests and other ecosystems, but these are essentially just carbon offset projects with a fancier label.

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