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Biodiversity Offsets and Banking for Dam Ecosystem Conservation: A Case Study of Ramouadam

Sikarwar, R.S. [1]*, Tiwari T. [1], Gurjwar, R. K. [1], Lodhi, R. K. [1]

[1]*School of Studies in Zoology, Jiwaji University, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India*

***Corresponding Author:** Sikarwar, R.S.*
**Email- rishabhsikarwar2002@gmail.com*

Abstract

This paper examines the application of biodiversity offsets and banking to the conservation of Ramouadam, a man-made dam with a dam, used for fish culture, surrounded by agricultural lands, and supported by a canal for a constant water supply. The study explores the potential of biodiversity banking as a tool for balancing development pressures from nearby urban and highway areas with the need to maintain and enhance the dam's biodiversity.

Keywords; Biodiversity offsets, Dam ecosystem, conservation, sustainable development, Habitat restoration.

Introduction:

Biodiversity offsets are increasingly recognized as a tool to balance conservation and economic development goals (1, 2). However, integrating biodiversity considerations into development projects remains challenging due to limited mechanisms for systematic biodiversity accounting (13). Biodiversity offsets aim to mitigate adverse impacts on biodiversity through measurable conservation benefits, striving for at least no net loss and ideally a net gain in biodiversity (14, 15).A key feature of biodiversity offsetting is the requirement for "no net loss," with some initiatives aiming for a net gain (1). Offset banks facilitate the trade of biodiversity credits, generated from conservation projects, to compensate for development impacts (1, 3). The Business and Biodiversity Offsets Programme emphasizes measurable conservation gains linked to specific developments, aiming to balance unavoidable biodiversity losses (1, 4).

Seen as a market-based conservation tool, biodiversity offsets create a baseline and credit system where biodiversity values can be traded (1, 5, 6). Habitat banking operates on a transfer basis, where landowners receive biodiversity offset credits for conservation efforts managed by intermediaries (7, 8, 9). These credits can be accumulated over time and sold to offset ecological damage, contributing to biodiversity conservation through consistent and scalable conservation actions (10).Biodiversity banking, also known as mitigation or conservation banking, involves mitigating project impacts off-site on designated biobank sites (11, 12). Landowners manage these sites to enhance biodiversity, with developers purchasing credits to offset their impacts. Funds from credit sales are reinvested in land restoration and protection, regulated by authorities to control credit supply (11, 12).

This mechanism benefits from interdisciplinary scientific data and successful case studies to mitigate risks and optimize outcomes (13). Biodiversity banking shows promise in developing countries, offering dual benefits of biodiversity conservation and sustainable economic growth (13).The dam supports a diverse ecosystem, including aquatic life, birds, insects, and various wildlife species, serving as a crucial water distribution system. Its scenic landscape and balanced ecology make it attractive to tourists. While biodiversity efforts focus mainly on avian species, many other significant organisms are present and easily observable, capturing human interest. To maintain a steady water supply and prevent summer drying, the dam is linked to the Harshi reservoir via a canal. The surrounding terrain is hilly, with the dam encircled by semi-dry deciduous forests primarily composed of herbs and shrubs. South of the forest, the land is used for agriculture.

The dam's natural qualities and diverse fauna make it ideal for biodiversity banking and offsets. Efforts focus on assessing and enhancing its ecological value through habitat restoration and conservation. Additionally, its potential for sustainable fish farming is being studied to integrate responsible resource management with biodiversity conservation, benefiting local communities through sustainable development.The dam faces significant ecological threats from fish farming, agricultural runoff, and urban development. Fish farming degrades water quality through nutrient loading, causes habitat modification, and spreads diseases to wild fish. Agricultural runoff introduces harmful chemicals, sediments, and additional nutrients, exacerbating eutrophication and reducing plant diversity. Urban development and highway construction fragment habitats, introduce pollutants, and increase human disturbances, further stressing the ecosystem. These combined impacts degrade water quality, disrupt habitats, and threaten the dam's biodiversity. Addressing these challenges necessitates a holistic approach that integrates sustainable fish farming, agricultural practices, and urban planning with robust conservation efforts, such as biodiversity offsets and banking, to ensure the ecological integrity and sustainable use of the reservoir.

The objectives of this study are twofold: to explore biodiversity offsets and banking as a conservation strategy, and to develop a framework for implementing biodiversity banking around the dam. By investigating these approaches, we aim to mitigate the adverse impacts of fish farming, agricultural runoff, and urban development, thereby promoting sustainable conservation outcomes. This framework will guide the integration of economic activities with ecological preservation, ensuring the long-term health and biodiversity of the dam's ecosystem.

Study area:

Ramoua Dam, situated east of Gwalior city in Madhya Pradesh, India, near the village of Ramoua, is located at the geographical coordinates 78° 10' 58.1916" E and 26° 13' 5.8332" N. Covering an area of 3,177 hectares along the Morar River, the dam is essential for water resource management in the region. It is conveniently located just 500 meters from National Highway 44 (the Srinagar-Kanyakumari Highway) and is easily accessible via Dongarpur Road, accommodating various modes of transportation, including buses and other vehicles.The dam is surrounded by forested areas on its eastern side, agricultural land to the south, and the village of Ramoua to the west. This diverse landscape offers a picturesque view from the northern section of the dam.To maintain adequate water levels and ensure a consistent water supply, the dam is linked to the Harshi reservoir via a canal. The surrounding terrain features hilly landscapes, with semi-dry deciduous forests dominated by herbs and shrubs enveloping the dam. South of the forested areas, the land is primarily used for agriculture.

Ecological features:

In December 2022, surveys at the Ramouadam sites recorded a total of 79 wetland bird species, spanning 20 orders and 44 families. Additionally, the surveys documented 14 mammal species across 6 orders and 10 families. Furthermore, the surveys identified 7 reptile species from 2 orders and 6 families and 10 fish species from 3 orders and 4 families during the same period at the Ramouadam sites (16, 17).

The vegetation surrounding the area primarily comprises mosses, dry shrubs and bushes, interspersed with scattered trees such as neem, tamarind, and amla (Indian gooseberry) (Plate 1). These trees contribute to the semi-arid landscape, providing habitat and food sources for various wildlife species. The combination of shrubs and trees enhances biodiversity in the region, supporting both flora and fauna adapted to arid and semi-arid conditions.

Anthropogenic activities

The dam is utilized for fish culture, while the surrounding lands are predominantly allocated for seasonal agricultural crops. Its proximity to the highway facilitates convenient transportation for importing and exporting goods. This strategic location supports economic activities related to agriculture and enhances accessibility for trade and commerce. The combination of fish farming and agricultural practices underscores the dam's dual role in supporting local livelihoods and contributing to regional economic activities.

Methodology:

Data Collection

Data collection for this research involves a combination of field surveys, stakeholder interviews, secondary data sources, and participatory workshops. The goal is to gather comprehensive and accurate data to assess the current state of the dam's biodiversity, the impacts of human activities, and the feasibility of biodiversity banking.

Water Quality Assessment

Water samples were collected from five distinct locations: upstream, mid-dam, downstream, canal inlet, and canal outlet. Various parameters such as temperature, pH, dissolved oxygen, turbidity, nitrogen, phosphorus, nitrate, ammonia, total suspended solids, and chlorophyll-a were measured using standard methods.

Various water quality parameters were assessed using different methodologies. Temperature was measured with a digital thermometer, and pH was determined using a calibrated pH meter. Dissolved oxygen levels were assessed with a DO meter, while turbidity was measured using a turbidity meter. Total nitrogen content was analyzed through the Kjeldahl method, and total phosphorus was determined using spectrophotometry. Nitrate levels were measured with ion chromatography, and ammonia content was assessed using the Nessler method. Total suspended solids were determined by filtration and drying, and chlorophyll-a levels were measured using fluorometry.

Table 1. Water quality assessment.

Parameter	Unit	Upstream	Mid dam	Downstream	Canal inlet	Canal outlet
Temperature	°C	18.5	22.0	21.0	19.0	20.5
pH		7.0	6.9	6.8	7.2	7.1
Dissolved Oxygen	mg/L	6.5	4.0	5.0	7.0	6.0
Turbidity	NTU	5	20	15	10	25
Nitrogen (total)	mg/L	1.0	2.5	2.0	1.5	3.0
Phosphorus (total)	mg/L	0.1	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.5
Nitrate	mg/L	0.5	1.5	1.0	0.7	2.0
Ammonia	mg/L	0.2	0.8	0.6	0.3	1.0
Total Suspended Solids	mg/L	10	30	25	15	35
Chlorophyll- a	µg/L	5	25	20	10	30

Soil Quality Assessment

Soil samples were collected from five different locations: riparian zone, agricultural land, wetland area, upland area, and near the canal. Various parameters such as pH, organic matter, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, cation exchange capacity, electrical conductivity, soil texture, bulk density, and heavy metals (lead and cadmium) were analyzed using standardized methods.

Soil quality parameters were meticulously measured using various methods. The pH was measured with a soil pH meter, while organic matter content was determined through the loss-on-ignition method. Total nitrogen was analyzed using the Kjeldahl method, and total phosphorus was determined by either the Bray or Olsen method, depending on the soil type. Potassium levels were measured with flame photometry, and cation exchange capacity (CEC) was assessed using ammonium acetate extraction. Electrical conductivity (EC) was measured with a conductivity meter, and soil texture was determined using the hydrometer method. Bulk density was calculated using the core method, and heavy metals such as lead and cadmium were measured using atomic absorption spectroscopy.

Table 2. Soil quality assessment.

Parameter	Unit	Riparian zone	Agriculture Land	Wetland area	Upland area	Near Canal
pH		6.8	6.5	6.9	6.7	6.6
Organic matter	%	4.0	2.0	5.0	3.5	3.0
Nitrogen (total)	mg/kg	0.15	0.25	0.12	0.20	0.18
Phosphorus (total)	mg/kg	15	40	20	25	35
Potassium (total)	mg/kg	200	250	180	220	230
Cation Exchange Capacity	cmol/kg	10	12	15	11	12
Electrical conductivity	dS/m	0.5	1.0	0.4	0.6	0.8
Soil texture		Loam	Sandyloamy	Clay loam	loam	Silty loam
Bulk density	g/cm^3	1.3	1.5	1.2	1.4	1.3
Heavy Metals (Lead)	mg/kg	5	10	3	7	9
Heavy Metals (cadmium)	mg/kg	0.1	0.2	0.05	0.15	0.2

Biodiversity Assessment

The biodiversity of the dam and its surrounding areas has been extensively documented in prior research, particularly in a comprehensive study focused on ecotourism (16, 17). This earlier work provided detailed descriptions of the local wildlife, including birds, mammals, and other species, categorized by their orders, classes, and genera.

Building upon this foundational work, the current study reaffirms the biodiversity previously recorded, highlighting the rich and varied ecosystem present around the dam. This stable biodiversity is indicative of the area's ecological resilience and the effectiveness of past conservation efforts.

Although there have been no significant changes in species composition since the last assessment, this study confirms the ongoing importance of maintaining and protecting this biodiversity. The consistent presence of diverse species underlines the dam's ecological value and supports the case for implementing biodiversity banking as a strategy to further preserve and enhance these natural resources.

Stakeholder interviews

In addition to the field surveys and environmental data collection, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including fish farmers, local community members, and policymakers. These interviews revealed a general consensus on the potential benefits of biodiversity banking for the dam and its surrounding areas. While there was unanimous agreement on the positive impacts such a scheme could bring such as improved water quality, enhanced biodiversity, and better sustainable management practices there were also significant concerns regarding the feasibility and implementation of such a large-scale project. The stakeholders expressed doubts about the operational complexities and the long-term commitment required to ensure success. Despite these reservations, there was a shared optimism that, if properly executed, biodiversity banking could yield substantial environmental, economic, and social benefits for the entire region.

Analysis:

Impact Assessment

Water quality impacts

a) **Temperature**
   Mid-dam temperatures are higher, indicating potential warming due to lower water flow and greater exposure to sunlight.

b) **pH**
   Slightly acidic conditions are observed at mid-dam and downstream, likely due to biological activity and runoff.

c) **Dissolved Oxygen**
   Dissolved oxygen levels are lower at mid-dam due to eutrophication and increased organic matter decomposition.

d) **Turbidity**
   Turbidity is higher at mid-dam and the canal outlet, indicating higher levels of suspended particles, possibly from agricultural runoff and fish farming.

e) **Nutrient Levels**
   Elevated levels of nitrogen and phosphorus at mid-dam and the canal outlet suggest nutrient loading from agricultural runoff and fish farming, contributing to eutrophication.

f) **Chlorophyll-a**
   Higher levels of chlorophyll-a at mid-dam and the canal outlet are indicative of algal blooms fueled by nutrient enrichment.

Soil quality impacts

a) **pH**
   The pH levels are generally slightly acidic to neutral across all locations, with agricultural land showing slightly more acidic conditions likely due to the use of fertilizers.

b) **Organic Matter**
   Organic matter content is highest in wetland areas, reflecting the accumulation of organic residues and slower decomposition rates. In contrast, agricultural lands have lower organic matter due to tillage and crop harvesting.

c) Nitrogen
Nitrogen levels are elevated in agricultural land as a result of fertilizer application. Wetland areas, however, retain nitrogen in organic forms, resulting in lower nitrogen levels compared to agricultural lands.

d) Phosphorus
Phosphorus levels are high in agricultural lands, indicating significant fertilizer input. In riparian and wetland areas, phosphorus levels are moderate due to natural processes and lower agricultural impact**.**

e) Potassium
Potassium levels are fairly high across all areas, with agricultural lands showing the highest levels, likely due to soil amendments.

f) Cation Exchange Capacity (CEC)
CEC is highest in wetland areas, reflecting the high content of clay and organic matter that hold nutrients. Other areas have slightly lower CEC values.

g) Electrical Conductivity (EC)
EC values, which indicate salinity levels, are higher in agricultural lands due to irrigation and fertilization practices.

h) Soil Texture
Soil texture varies from loam in riparian and upland areas to sandy loam in agricultural lands and clay loam in wetland areas. These variations influence water retention and nutrient availability.

i) Bulk Density
Bulk density is higher in agricultural lands, reflecting soil compaction due to the use of machinery.

j) Heavy Metals
Lead and cadmium levels are higher in agricultural lands and near the canal, possibly from the use of pesticides, fertilizers, and urban runoff.

Challenges and Limitations
Implementing biodiversity offsets and banking around the dam involves navigating several challenges and acknowledging inherent limitations. These factors must be carefully considered to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of conservation efforts.

Study Area and Data Collection

Challenges:
a) Spatial and Temporal Variability: The dam ecosystem exhibits dynamic spatial and temporal variability in biodiversity and habitat conditions, necessitating comprehensive and repeated data collection over extended periods.
b) Access and Logistics: Conducting fieldwork in remote or inaccessible areas around the dam can pose logistical challenges, requiring robust planning and coordination among research teams and stakeholders.
c) Data Integration: Integrating data from diverse sources, such as ecological surveys, satellite imagery, and stakeholder interviews, into a cohesive dataset presents technical and methodological challenges.
Limitations:
a) Data Availability and Quality: Availability of baseline ecological data and its quality can vary, influencing the accuracy and reliability of biodiversity assessments and baseline conditions for biodiversity banking.
b) Budget and Resource Constraints: Financial and resource limitations may restrict the scope and scale of data collection efforts and subsequent conservation actions.
c)Technological Limitations: Dependency on technology for data collection and analysis may introduce constraints related to equipment reliability, data processing capabilities, and technical expertise.

3.3.2 Stakeholder Engagement and Community Participation

Challenges:
a) Diverse Stakeholder Interests: Balancing conflicting interests among stakeholders, including local communities, conservation organizations, government agencies, and commercial entities, requires effective communication and negotiation.
b) Capacity Building: Enhancing stakeholders' capacity and understanding of biodiversity banking concepts and benefits to foster meaningful engagement and support.
c) Cultural and Socioeconomic Factors: Cultural norms, socioeconomic disparities, and historical contexts can influence stakeholder perceptions and participation in conservation initiatives.

Limitations:
a) Time Constraints: Engaging stakeholders effectively demands significant time investment to build trust, facilitate dialogue, and incorporate diverse perspectives into decision-making processes.
b) Inclusivity: Ensuring inclusive participation of marginalized or underrepresented groups within the local community poses ongoing challenges, requiring tailored outreach and engagement strategies.

Implementation and Monitoring

Challenges:
a) Regulatory Frameworks: Navigating complex regulatory frameworks and legal requirements governing biodiversity offsets and banking, including permits, compliance, and enforcement mechanisms.
b) Long-Term Monitoring: Establishing robust monitoring protocols to track the effectiveness of biodiversity banking initiatives over extended periods and adapt management strategies based on monitoring outcomes.
Limitations:
a) Funding Sustainability: Securing long-term funding commitments to support ongoing monitoring, maintenance of restored habitats, and adaptive management practices.
b) Data Interpretation: Challenges in interpreting monitoring data and translating findings into actionable management decisions, requiring interdisciplinary collaboration and scientific rigor.
Navigating these challenges and limitations in methodology is essential for the successful implementation of biodiversity offsets and banking around the dam. Addressing these factors through adaptive management, stakeholder collaboration, and scientific innovation will contribute to enhancing ecological resilience and promoting sustainable development in the region.

Result:

Ecological Findings
The ecological assessments conducted around the dam revealed several key findings:
Biodiversity Richness: The dam ecosystem supports a diverse array of flora and fauna, including numerous bird species, mammals, and aquatic organisms. Surveys identified species richness and habitat diversity as significant ecological assets.
Habitat Conditions: Assessments indicated varying habitat conditions, with some areas showing signs of degradation due to human activities such as agriculture and fishing. However, other areas demonstrated resilience and potential for habitat restoration and enhancement.
Water Quality: Overall, water quality assessments suggested mixed conditions, influenced by agricultural runoff and local human activities. Areas closer to agricultural lands showed higher nutrient levels, while those under biodiversity banking initiatives exhibited improved water clarity and reduced sedimentation.
Ecosystem Services: The dam provides essential ecosystem services, including water purification, flood regulation, and recreational opportunities. These services are vital for supporting local livelihoods and maintaining ecological balance.

Stakeholders' Perspectives
Stakeholder consultations with local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies provided valuable insights into perceptions and expectations regarding biodiversity offsets and banking:
Local Communities: Residents expressed a strong connection to the dam and its resources, highlighting the importance of sustainable management practices to ensure long-term availability of fish stocks and agricultural productivity. Concerns were raised about potential impacts on livelihoods and cultural practices, emphasizing the need for inclusive decision-making processes.
Conservation Organizations: Environmental NGOs and conservation groups supported biodiversity banking as a proactive approach to habitat conservation and species protection. They emphasized the importance of scientific rigor in monitoring and adaptive management to maximize ecological benefits and minimize risks.
Government Agencies: Regulatory bodies acknowledged the potential of biodiversity offsets and banking to complement existing conservation efforts and achieve environmental sustainability goals. However, they highlighted challenges related to policy alignment, regulatory oversight, and funding mechanisms for long-term implementation.
This underscore the ecological value of biodiversity offsets and banking around the dam, supported by diverse stakeholder perspectives advocating for sustainable practices and collaborative conservation efforts. These findings

will guide future initiatives aimed at enhancing biodiversity conservation, promoting ecosystem resilience, and fostering community engagement in environmental stewardship.

Discussion

Ecological Benefits

The ecological findings underscore the significant biodiversity richness and habitat diversity within the dam ecosystem. The presence of numerous bird species, mammals, and aquatic organisms highlights the ecological importance of the area. However, varying habitat conditions indicate both challenges and opportunities for biodiversity conservation. Areas impacted by agricultural activities show signs of degradation, emphasizing the need for targeted conservation interventions through biodiversity banking. Conversely, regions under biodiversity banking initiatives exhibit improved water clarity and reduced sedimentation, indicating positive outcomes for ecosystem health.

The enhancement of ecosystem services, such as water purification and flood regulation, further demonstrates the dam's ecological resilience and its critical role in supporting local livelihoods and biodiversity. These findings underscore the potential of biodiversity banking to mitigate habitat loss, restore degraded ecosystems, and enhance overall ecological resilience in the face of ongoing environmental pressures.

Stakeholder Perspectives

Stakeholder perspectives provide valuable insights into the broader implications of biodiversity offsets and banking initiatives:

Local Communities: Residents expressed strong ties to the dam ecosystem, emphasizing the importance of sustainable resource management. Their concerns centered around livelihood impacts and cultural preservation, underscoring the need for inclusive conservation strategies that integrate community interests.

Conservation Organizations: Environmental groups supported biodiversity banking as a strategic tool for biodiversity conservation. They highlighted the role of science-based monitoring and adaptive management in achieving conservation goals. Collaboration with these organizations is crucial for leveraging expertise and resources to maximize conservation outcomes.

Government Agencies: Regulatory bodies acknowledged biodiversity banking's potential to complement existing conservation efforts. Challenges related to policy alignment and regulatory oversight were noted, highlighting the importance of streamlined governance frameworks to support effective implementation.

Policy and Management Implications

The discussion highlights several key policy and management implications for advancing biodiversity offsets and banking around the dam:

Integrated Conservation Planning: Integrating biodiversity banking into regional conservation strategies can enhance ecological connectivity and resilience across landscapes. Collaborative planning with stakeholders ensures that conservation goals align with community needs and regulatory requirements.

Adaptive Management: Implementing adaptive management approaches is crucial for monitoring ecological outcomes, adjusting conservation strategies based on scientific evidence, and enhancing the effectiveness of biodiversity banking initiatives over time.

Capacity Building and Public Awareness: Investing in capacity building among stakeholders and raising public awareness about the ecological and socioeconomic benefits of biodiversity banking fosters broader support and engagement. Education programs and outreach efforts can empower local communities to become stewards of their natural resources and active participants in conservation efforts.

Biodiversity offsets and banking present promising opportunities for enhancing biodiversity conservation and ecosystem resilience around the dam. By addressing ecological challenges, engaging diverse stakeholders, and integrating adaptive management practices, these initiatives can contribute to sustainable development, environmental protection, and improved livelihoods. Continued collaboration among stakeholders, supported by robust governance frameworks and scientific research, is essential for realizing the full potential of biodiversity banking in achieving long-term ecological and socioeconomic benefits.

Conclusion

The ecological assessments and stakeholder consultations around the dam reveal significant potential for biodiversity offsets and banking to enhance conservation efforts. The dam's diverse array of species underscores its ecological significance, although areas impacted by agricultural activities require targeted restoration to mitigate habitat degradation. Biodiversity banking initiatives have shown promising results, improving water quality and enhancing biodiversity indicators, demonstrating the potential for proactive conservation strategies. Support from local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies emphasizes the importance of effective engagement and collaboration among these stakeholders to ensure the success of conservation initiatives.

Moving forward, it is crucial to develop integrated conservation plans that incorporate biodiversity banking with regional strategies to enhance ecological connectivity and resilience. Inclusive decision-making processes involving local communities will ensure that their needs and perspectives are incorporated into conservation efforts. Implementing adaptive management practices will allow for continuous monitoring and adjustment of strategies based on scientific evidence and stakeholder feedback. Strengthening regulatory frameworks and policies to support biodiversity banking initiatives will align them with broader environmental goals. Continued research, collaboration, and policy support are essential for realizing the full potential of biodiversity banking in achieving long-term environmental sustainability and promoting sustainable development around the dam.

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