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Carbon credit documentary should not have been shown, BBC admits

Corporation acts on Observer investigation into secretive trust linked to socialite Robin Birley that funded film on his carbon credits firm, Envirotrade

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The BBC has ruled that a sympathetic documentary about the 'philanthropy capitalism' of socialite Robin Birley should not have been shown. Photograph: Richard Young / Rex Features

A [BBC](#) documentary about socialite Robin Birley and his carbon credits business venture in Africa should never have been broadcast, an internal inquiry by the corporation has found. Millions of viewers were misled because the sympathetic documentary shown on BBC World News failed to declare that it was financed by a secretive trust that was linked to Birley.

The BBC acted in response to an *Observer* investigation into Birley's "philanthropy capitalism" venture in [Mozambique](#). Taxpayers' money was used to subsidise poor farmers there to protect forests and plant trees that absorb carbon dioxide. Envirotrade, Birley's company, then sells "carbon credits" to celebrities and businesses wanting to offset their emissions. Customers who used Birley's venture to offset emissions included the agency that handles Brad Pitt and George Clooney.

Rockhopper TV, the production company that made the documentary, knew but did not disclose to BBC executives, of links between Envirotrade and the Africa Carbon

Livelihood Trust, which funded the making of the documentary. Had it done so, *Taking The Credit*, the documentary, would never have been shown, the BBC ruled, although it also claimed the programme was balanced.

Birley set up and funded the Mauritius-based trust but would not say who its other donors are or how much Rockhopper was paid to make the programme. Envirotrade saw it as a "marketing" opportunity.

A BBC statement said: "As a consequence of this case, [we] will work closely with Rockhopper to ensure that robust compliance measures are implemented ... Until the BBC is fully satisfied that these measures have been put in place, no Rockhopper programmes will be acquired or commissioned."

Rockhopper, which is run by Richard Wilson, a former BBC environment correspondent, and ex-Sky News presenter Anya Sitaram, told the *Observer* that every indication suggested that the trust was independent.

However, the inquiry found there was a "conflict of interest [that] risked bringing the BBC's editorial reputation into disrepute" because the trust's managing director, Charles Hall, is also chief executive of Envirotrade.

The BBC's own compliance failures have not been made known because the corporation refuses to release its report into the Rockhopper affair, adding to concern that a wider problem exists over commercial sponsorship arrangements on its international channel.

Birley founded Envirotrade in 2002 with a South African, Philip Powell. A year later, the European Commission awarded a €1.5m (£1.3m) grant to Envirotrade and Edinburgh University to pilot a forest project at N'hambita, Mozambique. However, in October 2007, the EC suspended its last €450,000 payment for the project and concluded the following year that unsubstantiated claims were being made about its environmental impact. The suspension was still in force when Rockhopper filmed with Birley in Mozambique last August. By then, a second team of experts working for the EC had just returned from the project. Their report was more positive than the first, but continued to find "major drawbacks" with the implementation of an aspect key to N'hambita's survival – the sale of carbon credits. Viewers of the documentary, which was shown last October, were not told about these criticisms.

Envirotrade says it has sold £1m of carbon credits. However, the EC's criticisms could mean at least £150,000 are unverified and may have to be paid back. Charles Hall, Envirotrade's chief executive, told the *Observer*: "The business model for Envirotrade frankly remains to be proven. The fact that this can be made into a sustainable business on the basis of selling carbon offsets remains to be seen."

It has also emerged that Envirotrade's London arm is insolvent and owes £800,000 to its parent company in Mauritius.

Hall revealed that the N'hambita project needs an immediate £1m injection from Birley. However, Birley, who says he has already put in more than £1.5m, has given no legal undertaking to provide these extra funds.

Sitaram, executive producer of the documentary, said that had Rockhopper known about the EC's criticisms it would not have touched the project. However, six weeks before broadcast, Fern, a climate campaign group, outlined these criticisms in an email exchange with the programme's researcher.

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