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The Australian

“Doubt cast over offset planting”

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TREE-PLANTING schemes promoted by businesses and rock bands alike to offset carbon emissions do little to combat climate change, according to a think tank.

A paper by The Australia Institute released yesterday accuses governments and businesses of exploiting such "fads" to avoid the need for real cuts in greenhouse gas emissions.

"By diverting people's funds and attention to projects that are unlikely to reduce emissions significantly in the long term, some offset schemes could ultimately do more harm than good," Christian Downie, the author of the report, said.

"Tree-planting is the most popular type of carbon offset promoted in Australia but it is, in fact, the least effective for dealing with climate change.

"The evidence indicates that offsets from renewable energy are the most effective, followed by those from energy efficiency projects, with forestry projects ranked last."

The comments are a blow to companies that have supported tree-planting to offset their carbon footprints, including BP, Sainsbury's, British Telecom, Orange, Avis and MTV.

British rock band Coldplay bought 10,000 mango trees for villagers in Karnataka, in India, to offset the greenhouse gases released as a result of the production of their album A Rush of Blood to the Head.

Dido, Atomic Kitten, Leonardo DiCaprio, Kylie Minogue, Kevin Keegan and the Rolling Stones have also promoted tree-planting schemes.

Mr Downie said Australia needed a compulsory accreditation scheme for carbon offset projects.

He said there were strong grounds for excluding forestry-based offsets from an emissions trading system in Australia, or at least restricting their use.

"Tree-planting, or forestry, cannot secure real, measurable and permanent reductions in greenhouse gas emissions because sooner or later the forest will be felled, burned or destroyed," Mr Downie said.

"When (people) buy offsets from a forestry project with their airline ticket, for example, they are actually buying a promise that the immediate emissions from their flight will be gradually offset over the next 100 years.

"There can be very little, if any, guarantee that this will actually happen."

AAP