

# Can AI Fix Broken Climate Incentives?

When real-world carbon markets fail, what's the next move?

# No meaningful impacts on vegetation cover or nightlights

Protected Land Outcomes (EU, 1980–2020)

A recent study found that area-based land protection in the EU had no measurable effect on environmental or development indicators over four decades.

Despite decades of policy effort to expand protected land in the European Union, a new analysis by Caltech economist Prakash Mishra reveals that area-based targets did not meaningfully alter vegetation cover or human activity (as measured by nightlight intensity). This suggests that the design of conservation incentives—rather than the act of protection itself—may be the root cause of policy inertia.

Source: Caltech • Published September 18, 2026

<https://www.caltech.edu/about/news/how-algae-avocados-and-happy-accidents-helped-shape-a-career-an-interview-with-environmental-economist-prakash-mishra>



# 01

## Incentives > Land Area

The study reveals that simply designating land as protected is ineffective if local governments can choose where to place those zones. When incentives are misaligned—such as protecting land that’s already low-risk for development—results are neutral. For AI in commercial space and aviation, this implies that carbon offset markets must be designed with dynamic, data-driven site selection, not static geographic rules.



# 02

## AI Can Optimize Environmental Tradeoffs

Mishra's work shows that the real challenge isn't scarcity of land, but misaligned incentives. AI systems trained on satellite data and economic models can identify high-impact, low-opportunity-cost conservation zones—like degraded farmland or underutilized urban green spaces—where protection yields measurable environmental gain without stifling development. This is the next frontier for AI in sustainable aviation and space infrastructure planning.

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