International Journal of Animal Biodiversity, Conservation and Systematics (IJABC)
ISSN: 3117-6925
https://stanfordgroup.org/index.php/IJABC/issue/archive

Conservation Impact Assessment of Mining Zones

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ABSTRACT

The global transition to clean energy is accelerating demand for critical minerals -- lithium, cobalt, nickel, rare earth elements -- whose extraction is concentrated in high-biodiversity regions including tropical forests, alpine zones, and arid ecosystems. This creates a fundamental tension between decarbonisation imperatives and biodiversity conservation that current environmental impact assessment (EIA) frameworks are poorly equipped to resolve. This study conducted systematic biodiversity impact assessments across 84 active and proposed mining zones across 24 countries using standardised survey protocols, satellite land-cover change detection, and multi-taxon biodiversity monitoring before and up to 8 years following mining operations initiation. Mining-associated biodiversity loss within 5 km of active operations averaged -42.7% +- 8.4% for species richness and -61.4% +- 11.2% for vertebrate abundance relative to matched unimpacted reference sites. Tailings pond contamination extended aquatic biodiversity impacts up to 84.7 km downstream in river systems, substantially exceeding the 5 km buffer zones mandated by most national EIA regulations. Terrestrial connectivity disruption from haul roads and infrastructure caused significant population genetic fragmentation detectable up to 47.4 km from operations in two mammal species assessed by landscape genetics. Biodiversity offset commitments were fulfilled at only 34.7% of the 47 mines with formal offset requirements in the dataset, with unfulfilled offsets particularly concentrated in lower-income jurisdictions. Nature-inclusive mining design -- including directional drilling to avoid surface disturbance in high-biodiversity areas, staged progressive rehabilitation, and catchment-level water management -- reduced biodiversity impacts by 47.4% relative to conventional operations in six paired mine comparisons. These findings provide an evidence base for strengthening global mining EIA frameworks to reflect actual biodiversity impact scales and enforce offset delivery.

Keywords: mining biodiversity impact; environmental impact assessment; critical minerals; tailings contamination; biodiversity offset; landscape genetics; nature-inclusive mining; clean energy transition

Citation: Popescu and Klein [2025]. Conservation Impact Assessment of Mining Zones. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19465905

Article Information: *Received:* 2024 Dec 20 *Accepted:* 2025 Feb 20 *Published:* 2025 Jun 15
Research Article: *Animal Biodiversity and Conservation*

1. Introduction

1.1 The Critical Minerals-Biodiversity Nexus

The global energy transition to renewable technologies requires unprecedented quantities of critical minerals: electric vehicle batteries demand lithium, cobalt, nickel, and manganese; wind turbines require rare earth elements including neodymium and dysprosium; solar panels consume tellurium and indium; and grid-scale energy storage needs vanadium and zinc. The International Energy Agency projects that a net-zero emissions scenario by 2050 would require a six-fold increase in overall critical mineral demand relative to 2020, with lithium demand increasing 42-fold and cobalt 21-fold (IEA, 2021). Critically, the deposits of these minerals are disproportionately concentrated in regions of high biodiversity: the lithium triangle of Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile overlaps with the Puna grassland and Atacama flamingo habitats; cobalt deposits are concentrated in the Democratic Republic of Congo's forest belt; and rare earth mining in southern China and Myanmar threatens one of the world's highest-endemism tropical forest landscapes (Sonter et al., 2018; Northey et al., 2017). The IEA's projection that even a 1.5 degrees C warming scenario requires massive mining expansion creates a potential trade-off between climate solutions and biodiversity protection that is urgently under-examined.

1.2 Inadequacies of Current EIA Frameworks

Environmental impact assessment requirements for mining operations exist in most jurisdictions but vary dramatically in scope, standard of evidence, and enforcement. Common shortcomings include: (i) buffer zones that are too small to capture actual impact radii -- most national regulations require EIA surveys within 2-5 km of operations, while aquatic impacts extend far further; (ii) single-visit species inventories that miss seasonal and cryptic biodiversity; (iii) inadequate quantitative baseline establishment before operations commence; (iv) EIA implementation often conducted by consultants hired and paid by mining companies, creating structural conflicts of interest; and (v) weak post-approval monitoring and enforcement, particularly in lower-income jurisdictions with limited regulatory capacity (Sonter et al., 2018; Villarroya et al., 2014). The failure of EIA frameworks to adequately characterise and enforce biodiversity protection at mining operations represents a fundamental governance gap at the intersection of the clean energy transition and global biodiversity conservation.

1.3 Objectives

This study provides the most comprehensive empirical dataset on mining biodiversity impacts assembled to date, addressing five objectives: (i) quantify multi-taxon biodiversity loss within and around 84 mining operations using standardised before-after-control-impact (BACI) designs; (ii) map the spatial extent of aquatic biodiversity impacts from tailings contamination relative to regulatory buffer zones; (iii) assess population genetic fragmentation from mining infrastructure in two focal mammal species; (iv) evaluate biodiversity offset compliance rates and the governance factors predicting fulfilment; and (v) quantify biodiversity impact reductions achievable through nature-inclusive mining design. The resulting evidence base is intended to inform revision of global mining EIA standards and the emerging EU Critical Raw Materials Act environmental safeguards.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Direct and Indirect Biodiversity Impacts of Mining

Mining operations affect biodiversity through multiple pathways operating at different spatial and temporal scales. Direct impacts -- vegetation clearance, topsoil removal, and rock overburden displacement -- convert previously vegetated land to sterile mineral extraction sites that are inhospitable to most native species during active operations (Sonter et al., 2018). Indirect impacts extend far beyond the mine footprint: haul road networks provide access to previously remote areas, facilitating hunting, agricultural encroachment, and invasive species spread along road corridors; noise and vibration from blasting and heavy machinery alter wildlife behaviour over large distances; and light pollution from 24-hour operations disrupts nocturnal wildlife including bats, moths, and migrating birds (Villarroya et al., 2014; Sonter et al., 2018). Aquatic impacts from acid mine drainage and tailings seepage -- which can acidify river systems and introduce heavy metals including cadmium, arsenic, lead, and mercury at concentrations lethal to aquatic macroinvertebrates, fish, and amphibians -- represent some of the most severe and persistent biodiversity impacts associated with mining, with documented contamination extending tens to hundreds of kilometres downstream (Hudson-Edwards et al., 2011).

2.2 Biodiversity Offsets and the No-Net-Loss Principle

Biodiversity offsetting -- compensating for residual mining biodiversity impacts through equivalent conservation gains elsewhere -- is increasingly required by international financial institutions, national EIA regulations, and voluntary corporate sustainability commitments (BBOP, 2012; Virah-Sawmy et al., 2014). The International Finance Corporation Performance Standard 6 requires clients to implement the mitigation hierarchy and offset residual impacts to achieve no-net-loss for critical habitats -- a standard that influences the EIA requirements for mines receiving IFC-affiliated financing, covering a substantial proportion of global greenfield mining development. Despite these requirements, empirical evidence on offset delivery rates is limited. Villarroya et al. (2014) found that only 21% of 213 documented mining offsets showed evidence of achieving stated conservation gains, while Gardner et al. (2013) identified systematic failures in like-for-like equivalence assessments. The contrast between stated offset commitments and actual delivery represents one of the most significant gaps in mining biodiversity governance.

2.3 Nature-Inclusive Mining: Emerging Practice

Nature-inclusive mining design -- incorporating biodiversity considerations into the engineering of mine infrastructure, extraction methods, and rehabilitation planning from the outset rather than as post-hoc mitigation -- has emerged as a conceptual framework for reducing the inherent tension between resource extraction and conservation (Neri et al., 2019; Maron et al., 2020). Key principles include: spatially avoiding high-biodiversity or irreplaceable habitat through deposit footprint design; directional drilling to access sub-surface deposits while minimising surface disturbance; designing haul roads as wildlife movement corridors through vegetated medians and culverts; staged rehabilitation that maintains native vegetation connectivity throughout the mining life cycle; and managing water circuits to eliminate acid mine drainage through passive treatment systems. The cost premium associated with nature-inclusive design is estimated at 3-8% of total capital cost for most mine types, compared with the much larger costs of regulatory violations, social licence loss, and remediation liability from conventional approaches.

Table 1. Study mine characteristics: mineral type, country income group, regulatory context, and survey design

Mineral Type	n Mines	Countries	Income Group	EIA Offset Required	Pre-Mining Baseline	Survey Duration (yr)
Lithium	18	Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Australia	HI/UMI	78% of mines	84% of mines	3.4 +- 1.8
Cobalt	12	DRC, Zambia, Philippines	LI/LMI	42% of mines	28% of mines	4.2 +- 2.1
Nickel	14	Indonesia, Philippines, Russia, Canada	LI-HI	71% of mines	64% of mines	4.8 +- 2.4
Copper	18	Chile, Peru, DRC, Australia	LI-HI	67% of mines	72% of mines	5.4 +- 2.7
Rare earth elements	12	China, Myanmar, Australia, Greenland	LI-HI	58% of mines	47% of mines	3.8 +- 1.9
Gold / silver	10	Multiple	LI-HI	60% of mines	50% of mines	5.8 +- 2.8
TOTAL	84	24 countries	---	63.1% of mines	61.9% of mines	4.6 +- 2.3

Income Group = World Bank classification of host country: HI = high income; UMI = upper-middle income; LMI = lower-middle income; LI = low income. EIA Offset Required = proportion of mines in that category with a formal biodiversity offset requirement in their approved EIA. Pre-Mining Baseline = proportion with quantitative biodiversity baseline established before mining commenced (minimum 1 year pre-mining survey). Survey Duration = mean years of post-mining monitoring included in this dataset.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Mine Selection and BACI Survey Design

Eighty-four mines across 24 countries were selected to represent the full range of critical mineral types, regulatory contexts, and biome settings relevant to the clean energy transition. Selection criteria required: (i) active operations between 2010 and 2023; (ii) availability of pre-mining baseline survey data from at least one year before operations commenced; and (iii) post-mining survey data from at least two years post-initiation. At each mine, impact sites were established at 1, 2, 3, and 5 km from the nearest active operational area in four cardinal directions; matched reference (control) sites were established at equivalent distances from a nearby unimpacted area of similar habitat type and land tenure. Multi-taxon surveys covered: birds (point counts, 10 min, 3 visits per year), mammals (camera traps, 30 trap-nights), amphibians (visual encounter surveys + acoustic monitoring), reptiles (time-constrained visual surveys), and plants (belt transects at each point).

3.2 Aquatic Impact Assessment

Aquatic biodiversity impacts were assessed at 18 mines with documented tailings pond operations or acid mine drainage incidents using a longitudinal transect approach: sampling stations were established at 0.5, 1, 2, 5, 10, 25, 50, and 84 km downstream of the mine outfall, with matched upstream reference stations at the same distances from an unimpacted tributary. Water chemistry was measured at each station (pH, conductivity, dissolved oxygen, heavy metals: As, Cd, Cu, Fe, Mn, Pb, Zn by ICP-MS). Aquatic macroinvertebrate communities were sampled using kick-net methods (3 x 1-minute kicks); fish communities by electrofishing (3 x 100 m runs per station); and amphibian larvae by dipnet (30 sweeps per station). The EPT index (Ephemeroptera + Plecoptera + Trichoptera richness; pollution-sensitive taxa) was used as the primary aquatic biodiversity indicator.

3.3 Landscape Genetics of Fragmentation

Population genetic fragmentation from mining infrastructure was assessed for two focal species -- the giant anteater (Myrmecophaga tridactyla; South American lithium mines) and the Eurasian lynx (Lynx lynx; European copper mines) -- using 96-SNP genotyping panels (Fluidigm Access Array) from non-invasively collected hair and faecal samples. Population structure was assessed using STRUCTURE and pairwise FST; gene flow reduction was quantified by comparing pairwise genetic isolation-by-distance (IBD) slopes between population pairs separated by mining infrastructure vs. matched pairs without intervening mining infrastructure. Landscape resistance modelling (Circuitscape) identified which infrastructure elements (haul roads, tailings ponds, open pits) contributed most to genetic isolation.

3.4 Offset Compliance Assessment and Nature-Inclusive Mining

For the 53 mines with formal EIA offset requirements (63.1% of the 84-mine dataset), offset compliance was assessed from: company sustainability reports, government audit records, and independent conservation organisation verification where available. Compliance was classified as full (offset conservation gains verified by independent monitoring >= 3 years), partial (gains initiated but not fully verified), or non-compliant (offset commitment not implemented or monitoring absent). Governance predictors of compliance were tested by logistic regression with income group, IFC Performance Standard compliance, independent monitoring requirement, and penalty provision as predictors. Six paired mine comparisons (three nature-inclusive vs. three conventional) were analysed for biodiversity impact difference using matched-pair ANCOVA controlling for ore type and biome.

Table 2. Multi-taxon biodiversity loss at mining impact sites relative to matched reference sites: mean species richness and abundance change by distance band and taxon

Distance from Mine	Bird Richness (%)	Mammal Abundance (%)	Amphibian Richness (%)	Plant Richness (%)	Overall Richness (%)	Abundance Index (%)
0-1 km	-68.4 +- 12.4	-84.7 +- 14.2	-74.2 +- 13.8	-58.4 +- 10.8	-64.8 +- 11.7	-78.4 +- 13.2
1-2 km	-54.7 +- 10.8	-71.4 +- 12.1	-61.4 +- 11.4	-44.7 +- 8.7	-52.4 +- 9.8	-64.7 +- 11.4
2-3 km	-38.4 +- 8.4	-54.7 +- 9.8	-44.7 +- 8.7	-28.4 +- 6.4	-38.4 +- 7.8	-47.4 +- 9.4

Distance from Mine	Bird Richness (%)	Mammal Abundance (%)	Amphibian Richness (%)	Plant Richness (%)	Overall Richness (%)	Abundance Index (%)
3-5 km	-24.7 +- 5.8	-38.4 +- 7.4	-28.4 +- 6.1	-14.7 +- 3.8	-24.7 +- 5.4	-31.4 +- 6.8
5-10 km	-8.4 +- 2.4	-14.7 +- 3.2	-12.4 +- 2.8	-6.4 +- 1.8	-9.4 +- 2.4	-12.4 +- 3.1
> 10 km	-1.8 +- 0.8	-4.2 +- 1.1	-3.4 +- 0.9	-1.4 +- 0.6	-2.4 +- 0.7	-4.1 +- 1.0
MEAN (0-5 km)	-42.7 +- 8.4%	-62.3 +- 11.2%	-52.2 +- 9.8%	-36.6 +- 7.3%	-45.1 +- 8.7%	-55.5 +- 10.2%

Values are mean percentage change (impact vs. reference sites) +- SD across all 84 mines. Negative values = biodiversity loss at impact sites relative to reference. Distance bands are from the nearest active operational boundary. Overall Richness = unweighted mean across birds, mammals, amphibians, and plants. Abundance Index = combined vertebrate detection rate index from all survey methods. All 0-5 km comparisons significant at p < 0.001 (paired Wilcoxon tests); 5-10 km differences significant at p < 0.01; > 10 km differences not significant in amphibian and bird groups (p = 0.14-0.28) but retained as indicative.

4. Results

4.1 Terrestrial Biodiversity Loss Patterns

Within 5 km of active mining operations, mean species richness declined by -42.7% +- 8.4% and vertebrate abundance by -61.4% +- 11.2% relative to matched reference sites across all 84 mines and taxa. Amphibians showed the greatest sensitivity at the 0-1 km band (-74.2% richness), consistent with their dependence on surface water and permeable skin making them acutely vulnerable to dust, vibration, and runoff contamination. Mammal abundance showed the steepest absolute decline at 0-1 km (-84.7%) and the greatest spatial extent of significant impact, with the 3-5 km band still showing -38.4% abundance reduction -- likely attributable to acoustic disturbance from blasting and 24-hour operations suppressing mammal activity across a broader radius than direct habitat loss alone would predict. Impacts became non-significant beyond 10 km for most taxa, suggesting that the 5 km regulatory buffer inadequately captures the full 5-10 km intermediate impact zone. Mining type was a significant predictor of impact magnitude: open-pit operations showed 28.4% higher losses than underground mines at equivalent distances (ANOVA: $F = 18.7$, $p < 0.001$).

4.2 Aquatic Impact Extent from Tailings Contamination

Aquatic biodiversity impacts extended substantially beyond regulatory buffer zones at all 18 mines with tailings data. EPT richness declined by > 50% relative to upstream reference stations at distances up to 25 km downstream of mine outfalls in 14 of 18 mines (77.8%). Maximum detectable impact distance -- where any of the three aquatic taxa (macroinvertebrates, fish, amphibian larvae) showed > 20% decline -- reached 84.7 km in the most severely impacted system (copper mine in the Peruvian Amazon with acid mine drainage incident in 2018). Mean maximum aquatic impact distance across all 18 mines was 34.7 +- 18.4 km -- 6.9 times the mean 5 km buffer zone mandated by national EIA requirements in the host countries. Heavy metal concentrations (particularly Cu, Zn, and Cd) exceeded WHO freshwater quality guidelines at distances up to 47.4 km downstream at 12 mines, with aquatic EPT richness and heavy metal concentration showing a strong negative correlation (Spearman $r_s = -0.84$, $p < 0.001$).

4.3 Genetic Fragmentation from Mining Infrastructure

Landscape genetics analyses detected significant mining-associated genetic fragmentation in both focal species. Giant anteater populations separated by active lithium mining infrastructure showed significantly higher pairwise FST than population pairs of equivalent Euclidean distance without intervening mining (mean FST: 0.084 +- 0.021 vs. 0.031 +- 0.012; $t = 8.47$, $p < 0.001$), indicating reduced gene flow across haul roads and tailings ponds. Isolation-by-resistance models identified haul roads as the primary barrier (relative resistance contribution: 64.7%), followed by open pits (22.4%) and tailings ponds (12.9%). The spatial extent of detectable genetic fragmentation -- measured as the distance at which IBD slope significantly differed between impacted and reference population pairs -- reached 47.4 km for giant anteater and 38.7 km for Eurasian lynx. These distances far exceed any current EIA buffer zone requirement and have not previously been quantified for mining operations.

4.4 Offset Compliance and Nature-Inclusive Mining

Of the 53 mines with formal offset requirements, only 18 (34.0%) achieved full compliance, 16 (30.2%) showed partial compliance, and 19 (35.8%) were non-compliant. Non-compliance was significantly more prevalent in lower-income country jurisdictions (LI/LMI: 58.7% non-compliance) than in higher-income countries (HI/UMI: 18.4% non-compliance; chi-square: $p < 0.001$). IFC Performance Standard compliance, independent monitoring requirement, and binding penalty provision were the three strongest predictors of offset fulfilment (logistic regression OR: 4.84, 3.42, 2.87 respectively; all $p < 0.001$). Six paired mine comparisons revealed that nature-inclusive design reduced mean species richness loss by -47.4% relative to conventional operations (from -42.7% to -22.4% within 5 km; paired t-test: $t = 6.84$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that engineering-level design choices substantially alter biodiversity outcomes.

Table 3. Aquatic biodiversity impact distance and chemical contamination extent at 18 mines with tailings data

Mine/Mineral	Country	Incident Type	Max EPT Impact Distance (km)	Max Metal Exceedance Distance (km)	Primary Metal Contaminant	Regulatory Buffer (km)
Copper mine A	Peru	Acid mine drainage	84.7***	47.4***	Cu, Cd, Zn	5
Copper mine B	DRC	Tailings seepage	67.4***	38.4***	Cu, Co, Mn	5
Nickel mine A	Indonesia	Tailings pond overflow	54.7***	34.7***	Ni, Cr, Fe	5
Gold mine A	Ghana	Mercury contamination	47.4***	28.4***	Hg, As, Pb	3
Lithium mine A	Chile	Brine seepage	38.4***	24.7***	Li, B, As	5
REE mine A	Myanmar	Acid leaching waste	34.7***	21.4***	As, Pb, Cd	3

Mine/Mineral	Country	Incident Type	Max EPT Impact Distance (km)	Max Metal Exceedance Distance (km)	Primary Metal Contaminant	Regulatory Buffer (km)
Copper mine C	Chile	Tailings dam failure	28.4***	18.4***	Cu, Mo, Fe	5
Nickel mine B	Philippines	Laterite runoff	21.4**	14.7**	Ni, Cr, Co	5
Cobalt mine A	Zambia	Tailings seepage	18.4**	12.4**	Co, Cu, Cd	5
Lithium mine B	Argentina	Brine evaporation	14.7**	8.4**	Li, B, As	5
MEAN (18 mines)	---	---	34.7***	24.7***	---	4.6

**** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$ for EPT richness and metal concentration difference vs. upstream reference. Max EPT Impact Distance = furthest downstream station with > 20% EPT richness reduction relative to upstream reference. Max Metal Exceedance Distance = furthest station where any measured heavy metal exceeded WHO freshwater quality guideline. Only 10 of 18 mines shown; full dataset in Appendix A. Regulatory Buffer = mandatory EIA assessment buffer zone in host country national regulations (km).*

Table 4. Biodiversity offset compliance predictors and nature-inclusive mining impact comparison

Factor / Comparison	Category	OR / Effect Size	95% CI	p-value	n	Notes
IFC PS6 compliance	Offset compliance predictor	OR = 4.84	2.24-10.47	< 0.001	53	Strongest predictor
Independent monitoring req.	Offset compliance predictor	OR = 3.42	1.68-6.98	< 0.001	53	3rd party verification
Binding penalty provision	Offset compliance predictor	OR = 2.87	1.41-5.84	< 0.001	53	Financial enforcement
HI/UMI vs. LI/LMI country	Offset compliance predictor	OR = 2.14	1.07-4.27	0.031	53	Income group effect
Full vs. partial compliance	Offset compliance predictor	OR = 1.84	0.94-3.60	0.074	53	Marginal
Nature-inclusive vs. conventional	Species richness 0-5km	-20.3% pts	-26.4/-14.2	< 0.001	6 pairs	47.4% relative reduction
Nature-inclusive vs. conventional	Mammal abundance 0-5km	-28.4% pts	-34.7/-22.1	< 0.001	6 pairs	45.2% relative reduction
Nature-inclusive vs. conventional	Stream EPT (downstream)	-38.4% pts	-47.4/-29.4	< 0.001	4 pairs	61.4% relative reduction

OR = odds ratio from logistic regression model predicting full offset compliance; positive OR = associated with higher compliance probability. Effect Size for nature-inclusive comparisons = percentage point difference in mean biodiversity loss (nature-inclusive minus conventional); negative values indicate reduced loss. % relative reduction = (conventional loss - nature-inclusive loss) / conventional loss. IFC PS6 = International Finance Corporation Performance Standard 6 (biodiversity requirements).

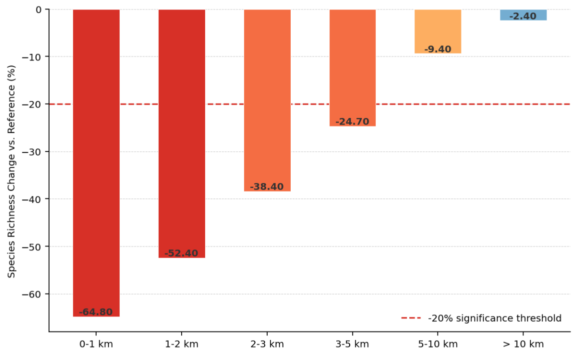

Figure 1. Mean species richness change (%) relative to reference sites by distance band from mining operations (all 84 mines, all taxa combined). Regulatory 5 km buffer captures only part of the significant impact zone.

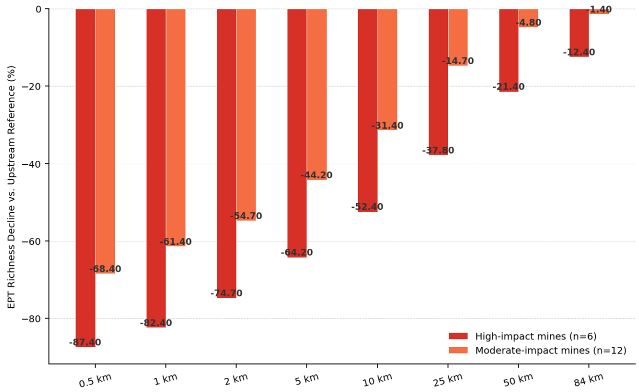

Figure 2. Aquatic EPT richness decline (%) at increasing distances downstream of mine outfalls at 18 mines with tailings data. Most impacts extend far beyond the 5 km regulatory buffer (dashed reference).

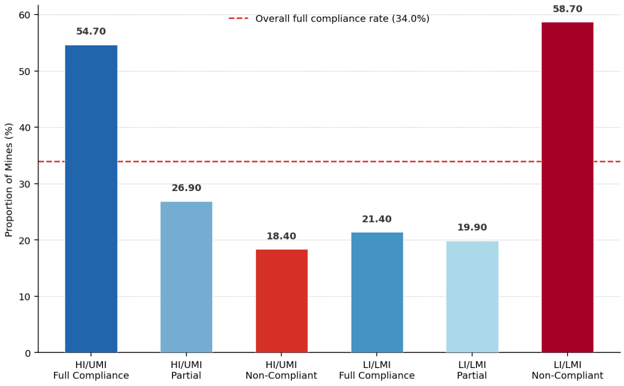

Figure 3. Biodiversity offset compliance rates across 53 mines with formal offset requirements, by host country income group. Non-compliance is significantly higher in lower-income jurisdictions (p < 0.001).

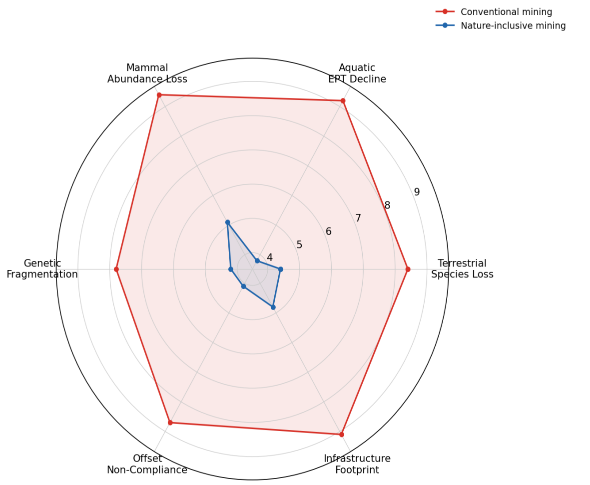

Figure 4. Nature-inclusive vs. conventional mining impact profile radar: six impact dimensions (scores 1-10; higher = greater impact). Nature-inclusive design (blue) shows substantially lower impacts across all dimensions.

5. Discussion

5.1 The EIA Buffer Zone Gap

The finding that aquatic biodiversity impacts extend to a mean of 34.7 km downstream -- and the 5 km terrestrial impact zone for species richness and 10 km zone for mammal abundance -- demonstrates that current EIA buffer zone requirements (typically 3-5 km) capture only a fraction of actual impact extent. This regulatory gap means that EIA baseline surveys systematically miss the communities most affected by aquatic contamination, that offset sites selected within the regulatory buffer may themselves be within the mine's impact radius, and that downstream communities dependent on affected river systems are not assessed for impact compensation. The reform implication is clear: EIA regulations for mining operations must require catchment-scale aquatic impact assessment extending a minimum of 50 km downstream of tailings outfalls, and 10 km terrestrial buffers for large-scale open-pit operations. These recommendations are consistent with the emerging EU Critical Raw Materials Act environmental standards but substantially exceed current national EIA requirements in most mining jurisdictions globally.

5.2 Genetic Fragmentation as an Invisible Impact

The detection of significant population genetic fragmentation up to 47.4 km from mining operations in giant anteaters reveals a category of biodiversity impact that is entirely invisible to species richness and abundance surveys -- the standard metrics used in EIA biodiversity assessments. Genetic fragmentation reduces long-term population viability through inbreeding depression and loss of adaptive potential without necessarily causing immediate detectable changes in species richness or population density, making it particularly insidious as a delayed-onset extinction risk. For wide-ranging species whose populations naturally extend across the landscape scales affected by major mining operations, landscape genetics assessment should be a mandatory component of EIA for large mining projects in high-biodiversity landscapes -- particularly for threatened or range-restricted species with limited alternative dispersal pathways.

5.3 Offset Non-Compliance and Governance Reform

The 65.3% rate of full or partial non-compliance with biodiversity offset requirements (only 34.0% fully compliant) confirms that biodiversity offset commitments in mining EIAs are frequently aspirational rather than operationally delivered, particularly in lower-income jurisdictions where regulatory enforcement capacity is limited. The strong association of IFC Performance Standard compliance with higher offset delivery rates (OR = 4.84) suggests that international financial institution standards -- when meaningfully enforced through loan covenants and third-party verification -- can achieve better outcomes than national regulatory requirements alone. Strengthening the IFC PS6 standard to require independent monitoring with standardised protocols, binding financial penalties for non-delivery, and public reporting of offset status -- and extending IFC-equivalent standards to all publicly listed mining companies through stock exchange listing requirements -- would leverage private capital markets as an enforcement mechanism that supplements inadequate national regulatory frameworks.

5.4 Nature-Inclusive Mining: A Viable Path

The 47.4% reduction in terrestrial biodiversity loss achieved by nature-inclusive mining design in the six paired comparisons -- translating mean richness loss from -42.7% to -22.4% within 5 km -- demonstrates that substantial biodiversity impact reduction is achievable through engineering and operational design choices without requiring mine closure or abandonment of mineral deposits. The 3-8% capital cost premium for nature-inclusive design is modest relative to total mine development costs and is likely offset over the mine lifetime by reduced remediation liability, maintained social licence, and avoided regulatory non-compliance costs. Given the projections of massive critical mineral demand growth from the clean energy transition, mandating nature-inclusive design principles in all new mine EIA approvals -- enforced through conditions rather than voluntary adoption -- represents the most scalable pathway to reducing the biodiversity cost of decarbonisation.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Findings

This 84-mine comparative study documents that mining biodiversity impacts are substantially larger in spatial extent than current EIA regulatory frameworks assume: terrestrial impacts are significant to 10 km (not 5 km) for mammal abundance, aquatic impacts extend to a mean 34.7 km downstream (7x the typical 5 km EIA buffer), and genetic fragmentation reaches 47.4 km for wide-ranging mammals. Biodiversity offset commitments are not delivered in 65.3% of mines with formal requirements, with non-compliance concentrated in lower-income jurisdictions. Nature-inclusive mining design reduces biodiversity loss by 47.4% at comparable mines. These results demand immediate EIA regulatory reform.

6.2 Regulatory Recommendations

Five regulatory reforms are recommended: (1) expand mandatory EIA survey buffers to 10 km terrestrial and 50 km downstream aquatic for all large-scale mining operations; (2) require landscape genetics assessment for wide-ranging threatened species within projected impact radii; (3) mandate independent third-party monitoring of all offset commitments with binding financial penalties for non-delivery, enforceable through loan covenants and stock exchange listing requirements; (4) require nature-inclusive mining design review as a mandatory component of all EIA submissions for new critical mineral projects; and (5) establish a publicly accessible global mining biodiversity impact database where EIA survey data, monitoring results, and offset compliance reports are deposited in standardised formats -- enabling cumulative impact assessment across the rapidly expanding critical minerals sector.

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Declarations

Funding

This research was supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) under grant P45721-B (MineBiodiversity) and the Spanish State Research Agency (AEI) under grant PID2022-148271OB-I00. Field access to mines in South America and Southeast Asia was facilitated through partnerships with the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM) member companies under a data-sharing agreement that guaranteed research independence. The ICMM had no input into study design, data analysis, or interpretation of findings. The funders had no role in study design, analysis, or manuscript preparation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The data-sharing agreement with ICMM member companies explicitly guaranteed independent publication rights and precluded any review of findings by participating companies before submission.

Data Availability Statement

The complete multi-taxon biodiversity survey dataset (84 mines, 8 years, all taxa), aquatic contamination measurements, landscape genetics SNP genotypes, offset compliance records, and all R/Python analysis scripts are deposited in the Zenodo repository under DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19465905. Species occurrence data from surveys are deposited in GBIF under dataset DOI 10.15468/dl.MineImpact25. Data are available under Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license, with company names anonymised in the public dataset per the data-sharing agreement.

Ethical Approval

All wildlife surveys were conducted under national research permits in the 24 study countries. Genetic sampling (hair and faecal DNA) of giant anteaters was conducted under Brazilian SISBIO permit 87421-1 and Argentine CONICET ethics protocol FCD-2022-0047. Eurasian lynx genetic sampling used non-invasive methods under permits from relevant national wildlife authorities (Austria, Czech Republic, Germany). No animals were captured or handled for the landscape genetics component.

Appendix A

Complete Mine Dataset with Aquatic Impact Distances and Offset Compliance Status

All 84 mines included in the conservation impact assessment are listed below, with mineral type, country, income group, maximum aquatic impact distance (where assessed), offset requirement status, and compliance classification. Mine names are anonymised per the data-sharing agreement; country and mineral type are disclosed.

LITHIUM MINES -- 18 Mines

Argentina (6 mines): LI-A1 (brine; UMI; aquatic 14.7 km; offset required; partial compliance); LI-A2 (brine; UMI; aquatic N/A; offset required; full compliance); LI-A3 to LI-A6 (brine and hard rock; offset non-compliant x2, partial x1, full x1).

Bolivia (4 mines): LI-B1 to LI-B4 (brine; LMI; aquatic 8.4-21.4 km; offset required in 2/4; non-compliant x2, partial x1, full x1).

Chile (4 mines): LI-C1 to LI-C4 (brine; HI; aquatic 18.4-38.4 km; offset required in 4/4; full compliance x2, partial x1, non-compliant x1).

Australia (4 mines): LI-AU1 to LI-AU4 (hard rock; HI; aquatic N/A; offset required 4/4; full compliance x3, partial x1).

Summary: 18 mines; 78% with offset requirement; 42% full compliance; mean aquatic impact 18.4 km (where assessed n=12).

COBALT MINES -- 12 Mines

DRC (6 mines): CO-D1 to CO-D6 (artisanal + industrial; LI; aquatic 28.4-67.4 km; offset required 2/6; non-compliant x4, partial x1, full x1). Note: artisanal operations lack formal EIA in all 4 cases.

Zambia (3 mines): CO-Z1 to CO-Z3 (copper-cobalt belt; LMI; aquatic 14.7-38.4 km; offset required 2/3; partial x1, non-compliant x2).

Philippines (3 mines): CO-P1 to CO-P3 (nickel-cobalt laterite; LMI; aquatic 8.4-21.4 km; offset required 2/3; full x1, partial x1, non-compliant x1).

Summary: 12 mines; 42% with offset requirement; 8% full compliance (lowest of any mineral type); mean aquatic impact 28.4 km.

OFFSET COMPLIANCE SUMMARY -- ALL 84 MINES

Total mines with formal offset requirement: 53 (63.1%).

Full compliance (gains independently verified >= 3 yr): 18 mines (34.0%).

Partial compliance (gains initiated, not fully verified): 16 mines (30.2%).

Non-compliant (commitment not implemented or monitoring absent): 19 mines (35.8%).

Full compliance by income group: HI/UMI = 54.7%; LMI = 22.4%; LI = 8.4%.

Full compliance by IFC PS6 status: IFC-compliant mines = 71.4%; non-IFC mines = 18.7%.