April 10, 2023

The Honorable Christopher A. Coons
Chairman
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Lindsey Graham
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Coons and Ranking Member Graham:

As you develop the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 State, Foreign Operations, and Related Agencies (SFOPS) Appropriations Acts, we urge you to provide strategic increases in funding for programs that help to conserve global biodiversity and promote sustainable natural resource management at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), State Department (State), and through the Tropical Forest and Coral Reef Conservation Act (TFCCA) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

Robust U.S. investments in international conservation are needed to respond to a set of pressing and intertwined challenges – the rapid loss of nature and biodiversity on a global scale, the global climate crisis, and the threat to global health and the economy posed by the spillover and spread of zoonotic diseases that can lead to future pandemics. All of these challenges have roots in the loss, degradation, and over-exploitation of nature, and global conservation investments are among the clearest and most cost-effective solutions to addressing them and the threats they pose to the United States and U.S. interests abroad. The U.S. has a central role to play in helping to galvanize global action, ambition, and investments to address these problems. At the end of 2022, the international community came together and reached a historic agreement to halt and reverse nature loss by 2030, under the auspices of the Convention on Biological Diversity. While not a party to the Convention, the United States has a central role to play in achieving its shared goals, largely through the support it provides through its conservation foreign assistance programs. Developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean are home to most of the world’s remaining biological diversity, but these countries often lack the financial resources and technical capacity to conserve and protect their globally significant forests, lands, waters, and wildlife populations. Developed countries like the U.S. are key partners in this respect, and they will need to significantly increase the resources available for conservation in the developing world if we are to protect these places and the people that depend on them.

As the science continues to remind us, we need to move quickly and bring greater ambition and resources to bear if we are going to ward off catastrophic nature loss. The global loss of nature poses a direct threat to the health and security of people, and the stability and prosperity of nations, including the United States. A 2019 intergovernmental report on the state of our planet
concluded that biodiversity is declining faster than at any time in human history, and that “Nature and its vital contributions to people…are deteriorating worldwide.” The Council on Strategic Risks identifies such ecological disruption as one of the most underappreciated threats to U.S. national security. The destruction and fragmentation of critical ecosystems, growing scarcities of natural resources due to overexploitation, and illegal exploitation and trade of wildlife, timber, and fish are undermining food and water security, harming economic growth, contributing to regional tensions, and providing support and financing to transnational criminal elements. The destruction of tropical forests and commercial trade in wildlife that risks transmitting pathogens from animals to people are also major drivers of the spillover of zoonotic diseases, such as HIV, Ebola, and COVID-19, and threaten to spark future pandemics. The costs of responding to such spillover after it has occurred are 100 times greater than the costs of preventing it in the first place through strategic conservation investments.

**USAID Biodiversity Programs**

Most U.S. foreign assistance for on-the-ground conservation is delivered through USAID and its robust portfolio of conservation and forestry programs. These programs help to protect some of the largest, most at-risk natural landscapes and seascapes, including tropical forests in the Amazon, Central Africa, and Southeast Asia; savannahs and grasslands; and transboundary water basins, as well as the livelihoods of millions of people who directly depend on such natural resources for their survival and economic growth. By preventing deforestation and the degradation of biodiverse and carbon-rich ecosystems, these programs also help to prevent zoonotic spillover and to combat climate change. They work in partnership with foreign governments, civil society, the private sector, and local communities to address direct threats to biodiversity loss and the underlying drivers of species extinction. While most efforts are focused on conserving biologically significant areas, USAID programs also strengthen policies, raise public awareness, and tackle global challenges such as the illegal trade in timber, fish, and wildlife. Funding through USAID Biodiversity programs is also used to support partnership activities between USAID and other federal agencies with technical expertise in international conservation, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and US Forest Service (USFS). For FY 2024, we request at least $500 million for USAID Biodiversity Programs, of which we request at least $50 million to support joint USAID and USFWS efforts to implement the Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE) in the Congo Basin.

**The Global Environment Facility (GEF)**

The Global Environment Facility (the GEF) is an independent international financial institution that provides grants to support sustainable use and improved management of natural resources. Operating in 183 countries, projects unite donor and recipient countries with U.S. corporations and NGOs. America’s investment in the GEF also yields a very high rate of return. Every dollar America invests in the GEF generates an additional $40 from other countries and partners for the GEF and its programs. GEF support has also been critical to placing 12 percent of the world's terrestrial area under protection, resulting in 3,300 protected areas that span 2.1 billion acres and
contain at least 700 globally threatened species, as well as the improved cooperation and governance of one-third of the world’s marine ecosystems. In addition to playing a leading role in protecting the world’s forests and fisheries, the GEF funds programs to combat poaching and wildlife trafficking around the world by strengthening national laws and law enforcement, monitoring wildlife populations, and reducing demand. They also work to address other pressing global environmental challenges, such as plastic pollution and marine debris as well as toxic chemicals and desertification. Last year, the U.S. and other donor countries finalized new 4-year pledges to the GEF as part of its 8th replenishment cycle (GEF-8). We request $150.2 million in FY24 to support the second installment of an enhanced U.S. contribution to GEF-8.

**Combating Wildlife Trafficking Programs at the Department of State and USAID**

Since FY 2014 Congress has directed funding to address wildlife trafficking through programs at USAID and the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) at State. In 2022, Congress also reauthorized the bipartisan END Wildlife Trafficking Act to enhance existing efforts and support implementation of a national strategy to combat wildlife trafficking.

Combating Wildlife Trafficking programs support U.S. security and economic interests by preventing transnational organized crime and corruption and helping to strengthen law enforcement and economic stability among our strategic partners around the globe. The illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products is worth billions of dollars annually and is carried out by highly organized transnational criminal networks connecting poachers in Africa, Asia, and other regions to high-end black markets around the globe. Wildlife trafficking is also closely linked to other transnational organized crimes, including the illegal trade in narcotics, and has provided financing for organized crime syndicates and extremist groups, including those with terrorist ties. State INCLE and USAID are using funds provided by Congress to invest in projects that support anti-poaching and wildlife law enforcement, strengthen judicial systems and rule of law, disrupt transit hubs, and reduce consumer demand for illegal wildlife products. Trade in wildlife that risks contributing to zoonotic spillover is also a major driver of future pandemic threats, and additional funding is needed through these programs for USAID and State INCLE to support countries in their efforts to prevent wildlife trade that can pose such risks. For FY 2024, we request $140 million in dedicated funding to support existing and new activities, including for INCLE to expand its efforts in Latin and South America and its work to address IUU fishing and conservation crime more broadly.

**Tropical Forest and Coral Reef Conservation Act (TFCCA)**

First enacted in 1998, the Tropical Forest Conservation Act has offered eligible countries the opportunity to reduce their official concessional debt owed to the U.S. government while generating funds locally to conserve biological diversity and protect ecologically and economically vital forest ecosystems. The Act was expanded to include coral reef ecosystems in 2019, and last year Congress reauthorized this highly successful and innovative “debt-for-
nature” program, which has produced tremendous returns on investment over the last 25 years, generating nearly $300 million for long-term tropical forest protection in over a dozen countries. In doing so, it is also contributing to efforts to address both climate change and the prevention of future pandemics due to zoonotic spillover. For FY24, we request $20 million for the TFCCA.

These important U.S. government investments protect globally important ecosystems and natural resources, prevent the illegal trafficking of wildlife, timber, fish, and other natural resources, and provide some of the clearest and most cost-effective solutions to a number of serious global challenges, including combating climate change and preventing future pandemics. In doing so, they serve as a stabilizing force in fragile regions, promote global health and local community development and economic growth, protect our interests overseas, and enhance America’s economic and national security. We urge you to provide strategic increases in the funding for these international conservation programs in the FY 2024 SFOPS Appropriation Act. Thank you for considering our request.

Sincerely,

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

Tim Kaine
United States Senator

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

Jack Reed
United States Senator

Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator

Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator
Sincerely,

Tammy Baldwin  
United States Senator

Robert Menendez  
United States Senator

Mazie K. Hirono  
United States Senator

Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator

Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator

Amy Klobuchar  
United States Senator

Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator

Ron Wyden  
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator