Leveraging Public-Private Finance for Conservation

Protected areas are commonly recognized as the most effective tool to secure globally significant land and seascapes, their biodiversity, and iconic species. In doing so, these areas contribute to local economies and support U.S. development and foreign policy objectives by providing clean water, supporting food security, and promoting governance and economic opportunities.

However, many of these areas are chronically underfunded, limiting their ability to achieve effective management. Currently, only 13% of the world’s annual spending on global biodiversity conservation is allocated to developing countries where most globally significant biodiversity occurs.1 Further, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, these areas are vulnerable to boom and bust funding cycles in which they must focus on short-term, project-based deliverables, rarely covering core recurring costs. Evidence shows that establishing effective management of individual protected areas costs between $5-10 million per area per year.

The U.S. Foundation for International Conservation Act (S. 618/H.R. 1298), is a bipartisan bill led by Sens. Coons (D-DE) and Graham (R-SC) and Reps. Joyce (R-OH), McCollum (D-MN), and Cuellar (D-TX). It has been introduced in the 117th and 118th Congresses.

What Would Be Financed?
The Foundation would match private philanthropic and U.S. government funds to provide long-term, predictable funding for core protected area management activities. This is generally $1-3 million per area per year. Once in place, this financing can attract additional funds. A review of specific sites found that for every dollar governments invest in protected areas, the economic rate of return is at least 6 to 28 times the original investment.2 A USFICA investment of $1-3 million/year is likely to leverage at least an additional $6-45 million in additional investments from other sources.


Conserving Globally Important Places

Projects that have host-country government and local community support and create economic opportunities for local communities would be prioritized. The Foundation’s investments will focus on countries with globally significant biodiversity and a demonstrated commitment to conservation. Safeguarding “natural security” against the drivers of famine, extreme weather, and authoritarian rule costs far less than suffering the costs of losing vital benefits provided by healthy ecosystems.

With core functions in place, host countries and the NGOs working in these areas can attract additional funds from other sources, including from revenue, other countries, and philanthropy. The Act’s $100 million authorization, which is doubled by the required private match, provides a carefully derived contribution of $1 billion over 5 years.

The governing Board of the new Foundation consists of USG officials, donors, and independent experts, providing the U.S. government with an important role in oversight and governance, while bringing private sector donors and expertise to the table. The Foundation would also be required to establish safeguards and accountability mechanisms. By requiring projects to be implementation-ready, funding would be focused toward on-the-ground results and bringing economic, social, and cultural benefits to local communities.

This public-private partnership model of leveraging U.S. funding and expertise has been successful in other congressionally-established charitable organizations and in the Legacy Landscapes Fund launched by the German Government in 2021. The U.S. Foundation would complement existing U.S. international conservation programs and those from other donor nations, including the Legacy Landscapes Fund.

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