



**STATEMENT BY DR. ANDREW STEER  
PRESIDENT & CEO  
BEZOS EARTH FUND**

**As submitted to the**

**U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS, AND RELATED PROGRAMS**

**Tuesday, May 2, 2023**

Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Graham, members of the Senate State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Subcommittee, thank you for convening this hearing on international conservation and the opportunity to testify. I'm Dr. Andrew Steer, President & CEO of the Bezos Earth Fund. Prior to this I was President and CEO of the World Resources Institute.

The Earth Fund is a philanthropy founded by Jeff Bezos in 2020. Our mission is to allocate \$10 billion in grants by 2030 to protect nature and address climate change. We have pledged \$3 billion to nature – including \$1 billion to conserving the nature we still have, \$1 billion to restore what we have lost, and \$1 billion to help transform food and agriculture to alleviate pressure on nature. In the past two years we have disbursed \$550 million for conservation and restoration. We plan to do much more, and we look forward to working in close partnership with the proposed Fund we are discussing today.

**The Challenge and Opportunity**

We are losing nature at a dangerous rate. The facts are stunning. Consider this: since 1970, one species – homo sapiens – has doubled its population. (That's us.) During the same period, the total population of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, and amphibians has fallen by more than half.<sup>1</sup>

We all are familiar with the accelerating loss of our beautiful planet. Biodiversity loss is everywhere and is accelerating. Nearly 75% of land surface and over 85% of wetlands have been altered or lost, and more than one million species may be in danger of extinction this century, creating grave threats to human health, well-being, food security, regional stability, and continued economic success. The world has years, not decades, to address biodiversity loss. This means we need to find dynamic avenues that create pathways for more conservation efforts in some of the most biodiverse and vulnerable parts of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> World Wildlife Fund. "Living Planet Report." Panda.org. Accessed on April 28, 2023.  
<https://livingplanet.panda.org/en-US/>.

There is good news. A large amount of our globally significant biodiversity can be found in a limited number of places, which makes conserving it easier. Over the past decade there has been real progress. Globally protected areas have been doubled to 16% of the land and 7% of the ocean. But this is not enough. Protected and conserved areas have been shown to be one of the most effective tools to conserve nature and support the wellbeing of millions of people, when well-managed and designed to respect the needs and rights of Indigenous People and local communities. Protected and conserved areas provide benefits to local communities – including fresh water, clean air and fertile soil for food production, and poverty alleviation, as well as stability and regional security. Additionally, protected areas serve as a backbone for the larger landscape scale conservation and restoration that is needed.

Globally, there is growing political momentum in support of conservation. Last year almost all the nations of the world, including the United States, agreed to protect 30% of the terrestrial, freshwater, and marine ecosystems most important for biodiversity by 2030. This marked a remarkable increase in ambition and, if implemented, could be game-changing. Research indicates that sound guardianship of 30% of the planet in the most important places for biodiversity could protect up to 80% of plant and animal species, and secure 60% of the planet's carbon stocks and 66% of the planet's clean water.

It is important to note that to be successful conservation must be done right. Most important it must involve and be owned by local inhabitants and indigenous peoples. Too many efforts have failed due to top-down measures. It must also be scientifically driven, drawing upon the highest quality biological and social sciences.

### **Conservation, Resilience and Security**

We are also learning how critical conservation can be in promoting security – for communities, countries, and the United States.

First, conservation helps to protect and preserve ecosystems. Healthy and diverse ecosystems maintain soil fertility and provide food and clean water. When these ecosystems are healthy, they are better able to withstand environmental disturbances such as droughts, floods, and storms, which can lead to crop failures, water shortages, and other problems that can cause social strife and dislocation and can destabilize a country.

Second, conservation can help to reduce the risk of conflict over natural resources. Many conflicts throughout history have been driven by competition over resources such as water, land, and timber. By conserving these resources and using them sustainably, countries can reduce the likelihood of such conflicts arising.

Third, illegal exploitation of nature can fund conflict and threaten stability. Illegal wildlife trade, for example, is funding criminal networks and militias. Ivory and rhino horns are a source of income for armed groups in Africa. Poaching is destabilizing economies, undermining good governance, and decimating iconic species. Illegal wildlife trafficking may also contribute to the spread of zoonotic diseases, such as Ebola and SARS.

There are numerous examples of how conservation can help create more stable and secure countries. A few examples:

- Costa Rica<sup>2</sup>: Costa Rica is known for its commitment to conservation, having protected over 25% of its land area in national parks and reserves. This has helped to create a thriving ecotourism industry, which has become a major source of revenue for the country. By preserving its natural resources, Costa Rica has been able to build a sustainable economy that benefits both the environment and the people.
- Rwanda<sup>3</sup>: After the genocide in 1994, Rwanda faced significant challenges in rebuilding its economy and society. The country has made significant progress in recent years, in part due to its focus on conservation. Rwanda has established several national parks and protected areas, including Volcanoes National Park, which is home to the endangered mountain gorilla. This has helped to attract tourists and generate revenue, creating jobs for tens of thousands of people.
- Namibia<sup>4</sup>: Namibia has implemented a community-based natural resource management program, which gives local communities the right to manage and benefit from wildlife and other natural resources. This has helped to reduce conflict over resources, while also providing economic opportunities for local communities. As a result, Namibia has seen a significant increase in wildlife populations, including elephants and lions, promoting jobs and stability.
- Congo Basin<sup>5</sup>: The Congo Basin is a region of immense ecological importance, home to some of the world's most biodiverse forests and a significant proportion of Africa's wildlife. However, the region is facing significant threats from deforestation, mining, and other human activities. Conservation efforts in the Congo Basin have focused on protecting key areas of forest and wildlife habitat, as well as supporting sustainable livelihoods for local communities. Through these efforts, conservation has helped to reduce conflict over natural resources, promote sustainable economic development, and preserve the rich biodiversity of the Congo Basin.

## What's Missing?

Conservation is a rare win-win-win. So why is it not happening faster and better? Let me suggest three things that are necessary to unlock more progress: finance, political engagement, and genuine partnerships between public and private sectors. **The proposed bipartisan bill, introduced by Senator Coons and Senator Graham, offers all three.**

**Finance:** The lack of funding is a major obstacle to the effective management of protected and conserved areas. Addressing the lack of financial resources – especially long-term funding – by creating a new public-private partnership is one of the best opportunities for the U.S. government

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<sup>2</sup> Costa Rica: "Costa Rica." World Bank, last modified October 22, 2021, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/costarica/overview>.

<sup>3</sup> Rwanda: "Rwanda: A Conservation Success Story." World Wildlife Fund, last modified October 22, 2021, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/rwanda-a-conservation-success-story>.

<sup>4</sup> Namibia: "Community-based natural resource management in Namibia." International Institute for Environment and Development, last modified October 22, 2021, <https://www.iied.org/community-based-natural-resource-management-namibia>.

<sup>5</sup> Congo Basin: "Conservation in the Congo Basin." Wildlife Conservation Society, last modified October 22, 2021, <https://www.wcs.org/our-work/places/congo-basin>.

to enhance its role in protecting biodiversity and improving security. A new public-private partnership can mobilize significant new funding from both public and private sources to address the funding gap and provide the long-term funding required for the effective management of protected and conserved areas.

This common-sense bill would empower a new entity to leverage private funding toward the goal of conserving the most vulnerable parts of the world. By passing this legislation, the U.S. Congress would advance its leadership in enabling more public-private investment in global conservation.

**Political Engagement:** While most countries in the world have made a commitment to increase conservation under the “30x30” pledge, many face major headwinds from vested interests. In our experience it is highly valuable for such leaders to know of the support of the U.S., and to regularly participate in dialog with senior U.S. politicians. While the proposed fund would be formally independent of the U.S. government, it would be partially funded by it, and would, we expect, benefit from regular engagement, including in-country visits which would engage at the highest levels. This would be a vital complement to any financial contributions.

**Partnership with the Private and Philanthropic Sectors:** Private philanthropy is committing significant resources to conservation and plays a highly complementary role to public funding. One way philanthropy has contributed to this agenda is through innovative partnership models supporting specific goals. For example, the Protecting our Planet (POP) challenge is the largest-ever private funding commitment to biodiversity conservation. Eleven organizations<sup>6</sup> have pledged \$5 billion in grants to help achieve the “30 by 30” initiative.

This coalition of philanthropists committing \$5 billion has not created a new fund. Rather they seek to closely coordinate their work, share analysis, and mix funding for specific programs. We prioritize efforts with indigenous peoples and local communities, as well as local and federal governments. These private funders are supporting projects around the globe that will help achieve the 30x30 initiative as proposed by the High Ambition Coalition (HAC) for Nature and People, a group of 70 nations. The work of these and other private funders can be even more effective if done in partnership with the proposed initiative. Leverage will come both from increased financial flows, but also from the synergies that arise from public and private actors. Both “public” and “private” can reach different places and influence different actors, and both will be more effective in the presence of the other.

There are examples of other governments doing similar investments. An analogous program, developed by the German government, the Legacy Landscape Fund, is successfully providing sustainable funding for the effective management of protected and conserved areas in developing countries. Importantly, it has unlocked large amounts of private dollars and unleashed an entrepreneurial and cost-effective approach to conservation. This is critical to closing critical gaps to identify and financially support implementation-ready projects.

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<sup>6</sup> Members of the Protecting Our Planet challenge are: Arcadia, the Bezos Earth Fund, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Bobolink Foundation, Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, International Conservation Fund of Canada, Re:wild, Nia Tero, Rainforest Trust, Rob & Melani Walton Foundation, and the Wyss Foundation

## **Conclusion**

Effectively managed protected and conserved areas that improve natural resource management, and restoration of degraded lands have been shown to reduce conflict and migration in response to food insecurity and drought. They have also protected irreplaceable natural beauty and the diversity of life. In addition, the involvement of local communities with the effective management of conserved areas, improves their economic opportunity and even instills good governance and democracy.

With a focus on protected and conserved areas, this new entity will create synergies with efforts by USAID, USFWS, and others to focus on other effective conservation measures that are needed to achieve landscape scale conservation. These investments collectively represent smart U.S. foreign policy and aid. Durable U.S. government funding, that leverages private sector resources, will help ensure this leadership is valued and our core economic and national security interests are advanced.

Thank you.