

# Wildlife-based enterprise development through public-private partnerships: United States Foundation for International Conservation



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Joseph Goergen, Research Associate, African Wildlife Economy Institute

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## Introduction

The **U.S. Foundation for International Conservation (USFIC) Act**<sup>1</sup> is a bipartisan piece of legislation passed within the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress's National Defence Authorization Act on December 18, 2024. The bill establishes an independent foundation to fund protected areas management around the world, focused on supporting indigenous peoples and local communities managing landscapes of high biodiversity and ecological importance across priority areas of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Up to \$100 million of government funds will be authorised annually for ten years and leverages a 1 to 2 match with the private sector, representing a potential \$3 billion public-private partnership from 2025 to 2035.

This historic commitment will likely improve national contributions to achieving Target 3 of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity's **Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)**<sup>2</sup> – i.e., the '30 by 30' target to "ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas... are effectively conserved and managed" – by helping to address a \$2 billion funding gap needed for effective governance of protected areas in developing countries, in addition to larger resource mobilisation needs<sup>3</sup>. As Target 3 seeks to scale "ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures", referred to as OECMs,<sup>4</sup> the USFIC presents an opportunity to incentivise diverse project finance options that extend beyond traditional protected areas. Importantly, USFIC will complement

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Senate. (2023). *S. 618 – United States Foundation for International Conservation Act of 2024*. 118<sup>th</sup> Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/618>.

<sup>2</sup> Convention on Biological Diversity. *Target 3 – Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*. <https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets/3>.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Environment Programme. (2021). *State of Finance for Nature: Tripling investments in nature-based solutions by 2030*. Nairobi, Kenya.

<sup>4</sup> Jonas, H.D., Wood, P., & Woodley, S., Volume Editors. (2024). *Guidance on other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs)*. IUCN WCPA Good Practice Series, No. 36. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. <https://doi.org/10.2305/LAAW4624>.

traditional U.S. government spending on international conservation – e.g., U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programmes and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service species grants, which is especially relevant given the current lack of political support for federal funding or foreign aid from the U.S. Administration.

Funding pledges to USFIC have been made by philanthropists, non-governmental organisations, and corporations including the Arcadia Fund, Bezos Earth Fund, Bobolink Foundation, Emerson Collective, Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, International Conservation Fund of Canada, MARS Inc., Nia Tero, Rainforest Trust, Re:wild, and Rob Walton Foundation. Advocacy efforts for the legislation, coordinated in part by the **International Conservation Caucus Foundation**<sup>5</sup>, have also been supported by a coalition of large non-profits such as the African Wildlife Foundation, Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Society, and World Wildlife Fund, in addition to sportsmen's groups.



#### **Bipartisan support for the passage of USFIC in December 2024**

*"Smart investments in international conservation don't just protect our environment, they reduce the threat of security challenges resulting from regional instability by strengthening local economies and lessening the draw of extremist groups, while cracking down on the poaching and illegal wildlife trafficking that fund terrorism. A public investment that has already been paid for will unlock hundreds of millions of additional dollars in private funds to combat security and environmental threats across the Global South. I'm delighted that this new foundation has been passed into law as part of the NDAA, and I'm looking forward to working with partners across the aisle and in the private sector to get it up and running in the coming months."*

**Senator Chris Coons (D-DE)**

*"The U.S. Foundation for International Conservation is a win-win in that the bill leverages private capital while supporting the long-term protection of critical landscapes around the world. Investments in conservation lead to food security and regional stability. I am proud to work with Senator Coons, my colleagues, and stakeholders to position the United States as a leader in international conservation."*

**Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC)**

<sup>5</sup> International Conservation Caucus Foundation. (2024, February 27). *International Conservation Caucus drives passage of U.S. Foundation for International Conservation Act to mobilize public and private funding for people and wild places*. <https://internationalconservation.org/blog/international-conservation-caucus-drives-passage-of-u-s-foundation-for-international-conservation-act-to-mobilize-public-and-private-funding-for-people-and-wild-places>



Figure 1: Harvested devils' claw (NACSO/WWF Namibia)

## The financial value of conserving areas and supporting their governance

Protected areas and conservation areas – e.g., community-managed conservancies<sup>6</sup> – are valuable natural assets at the nexus of nature finance, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable development. Local people depend on ecosystem services and economic activities generated by these areas<sup>7</sup>, including rural employment opportunities, livelihoods, food security, medicines, fuel, and socio-cultural values. However, indigenous communities are often excluded from realising some of these benefits in or around legally protected areas, making alternative conservation models, such as community-led initiatives, essential. Intact landscapes with resilient ecosystems also contribute directly and indirectly to the global economy, as the financial sector increasingly recognises dependence on nature and associated business risks with an estimated value of \$44 trillion or half the world's total Gross Domestic Product<sup>8</sup>.

Important areas for biodiversity, however, often lack long-term financial support and viable investment opportunities. Without adequate funding or enabling conditions for

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<sup>6</sup> Goergen, J. D., Lindeque, M., Louis, M. P., Kellner, K. F., Roloff, G. J., & Belant, J. L. (2024). Drivers of hunting and photographic tourism income to communal conservancies in Namibia. *Global Ecology and Conservation*, 56, e03294. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2024.e03294>.

<sup>7</sup> Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. (2005). *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Synthesis*. Island Press. Washington, DC. <https://www.millenniumassessment.org/documents/document.356.aspx.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> World Economic Forum. (2020). *Nature Risk Rising: Why the Crisis Engulfing Nature Matters for Business and the Economy*. New Nature Economy series. Geneva, Switzerland. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/nature-risk-rising-why-the-crisis-engulfing-nature-matters-for-business-and-the-economy/>.

economic alternatives, local governance structures struggle to enforce conservation policies. This governance gap can lead to habitat fragmentation and unsustainable wildlife harvesting. From a U.S. perspective, potential resource conflict and instability could impact market competitiveness, private sector operations, or regional business cooperation. Investing in protected areas management, therefore, offers a double materiality effect across financial and environmental benefits essential for addressing conservation needs – e.g., habitat loss, community development – while also promoting U.S. strategic interests in global trade and national security.

The interconnected conservation and development sectors have recognised the importance of localised funding – e.g., as articulated in USAID’s Biodiversity Policy – and the critical need to empower indigenous peoples and local communities in decision-making processes. Localisation, however, can be difficult to institutionalise or realise on the ground, particularly for project funding involving entrenched foreign aid interests or innovative nature finance mechanisms. Additionally, many protected areas have historically excluded indigenous peoples and local communities, and financial returns from nature-based industries and tourism infrastructure can be limited when sustainable use revenue streams are prohibited.

Now that USFIC has been enacted with a conservation goal and long-term financing shared as a public-private partnership, the U.S. State Department is leading the design phase and institutional arrangements. The Foundation will be led by a Board appointed by the Secretary of State in consultation with Congressional leadership, with the intention of administering the fund and grant disbursements equitably and effectively, ensuring a high level of accountability. Adaptive management challenges will include localisation of funding, project implementation processes, engagement with local communities, and social safeguards for indigenous peoples, in addition to addressing in-country capacity needs or maintaining leadership through political change.



Figure 2: Edible marula fruit (Bernaud Dupont)

## Recommendations

As long-term foreign aid to protected areas is unlikely, investable business cases need to be developed to improve financial sustainability, such as investments in wildlife-based enterprises that generate financial returns from sustainable use of wild species, incentivising conservation. Wildlife enterprise development can diversify conservation funding and reduce financial dependence on external donors or national treasuries. Target 3 of the GBF on scaling area-based conservation could also

be strategically linked to **Targets 5 and 9** on ensuring that management, harvesting, use, and trade of wild species are sustainable, legal, and beneficial to people.

With this multifaceted approach, we recommend that USFIC undertake the following:

- Evaluate potential opportunities for wildlife-based or wildlife-friendly enterprises in project management processes, including national assessments, site selection, partnerships, and grant award criteria
- Collect data on socio-economic performance indicators and project level impact – e.g., income generation, job creation, food security, relative poverty reduction
- Integrate financial metrics into project monitoring frameworks, including financial modelling of projected savings – e.g., lower costs for law enforcement or human-wildlife conflict compensation – along with traditional biodiversity research and environmental systems, such as the Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool
- Prioritise engagement with indigenous peoples, local communities, and private landowners, including training to build capacity and increase participation in new wildlife business models, scientific monitoring, and conservation programmes

An area-based wildlife economy could include a mosaic of small to medium-sized enterprises providing wildlife-based goods and services for local, national, regional, and international markets. These enterprises could operate in protected areas or other conserved areas. Examples aligned with USFIC's conservation objectives, depending on project settings and cultural context, include the following:

- Wildlife-based or wildlife-friendly foods from beekeeping, fishing, foraging, hunting, and sustainable, regenerative crop farming, aquaculture, or animal husbandry
- Wildlife-based tourism offerings for local and international tourists who come to view wildlife, hunt, or fish, with innovative models for community co-management or ownership
- Wild plant and animal ingredients for medicinal products and well-being products
- Sustainable harvesting of wild plants for construction materials and fuels – e.g., grass thatching, timber, firewood, and biomass charcoal
- Processing facilities for wildlife-based products – e.g., game meat butcheries, tanneries for wild leather products, factories for wild plant-based medicines
- Wildlife-friendly technologies and services to mitigate conflicts and enable co-existence of wild and domestic species – e.g., predator fencing and standards

Strategic investments in scaling wildlife enterprises create opportunities for a public-private partnership, such as USFIC, to leverage funding from existing Project for Finance Permanence models<sup>9</sup> or nature-based businesses and attract additional financing from the private sector, impact investment funds, or regional economic bodies. We suggest the Foundation prioritise catalytic grants that accelerate the development of early-phase wildlife enterprise ideas and scale project implementation from income generation to financial sustainability.

Catalytic grants could also fund design and application of blended finance approaches at landscape levels, focusing on payment for ecosystem service mechanisms – e.g., user fees; biodiversity, carbon, or water credits – or seed funding to establish local conservation trust funds. The Tiger Landscape Investment Fund<sup>10</sup> is one such example of a blended financial instrument prioritising this approach to developing community-based wildlife enterprises.

Public-private partnerships require stable political will from participating governments and support from partner organisations to effectively develop wildlife enterprises, representing a possible paradigm shift in traditional conservation and development funding practices. Governments must also improve policy or legal conditions for land use planning and tenure rights that enable economic activities for nature-based business or protected area co-management agreements with indigenous peoples and local communities.



Figure 3; Fishing in Virunga National Park (Nina R)

Socio-economic transformation and reduced dependence on foreign aid, in turn, will maintain political support for conservation through sustainable use. Incorporating wildlife economy enterprise development into USFIC's theory of change and project finance models will further advance its democratic goals for U.S. national security and business interests abroad by providing impactful funding for both nature and people.

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9 Cabrera, H. et al. (2021). Securing Sustainable Financing for Conservation Areas: A Guide to Project Finance for Permanence. Amazon Sustainable Landscapes Program, World Wildlife Fund. Washington, D.C.

<https://www.worldwildlife.org/publications/securing-sustainable-financing-for-conservation-areas> .

10 Tiger Conservation Coalition (2024). Tiger Landscape Investment Fund. Sustainable Finance for Tiger Landscapes Conference. Paro, Bhutan. [https://tiger-finance.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Tiger-Landscapes-Investment-Fund\\_V6.pdf](https://tiger-finance.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Tiger-Landscapes-Investment-Fund_V6.pdf) .