

# Trump's slashing of environmental and development aid: a turbo for species extinction and pandemics

The dismantling of the US development aid agency USAID by US President Donald Trump has plunged the global fight against the destruction of nature into a crisis at a crucial moment. Experts fear the extinction of further species and warn of a growing pandemic risk.

*By Thomas Krumenacker*

published in German by [RiffReporter](#), 29.3.2025. The English version you find here

The turning point in US development and environmental policy came overnight, without warning, for aid organisations and governments around the world. At the end of January, they received an email with the subject line 'Stop-Work Order'. In it, the US development agency USAID, referring to a corresponding executive order from President Donald Trump, ordered a stop to financing and spending on almost all programmes from the US development budget – with immediate effect.

More than 90 percent of all development aid programmes with financial commitments of over 60 billion dollars are affected. The funding freeze, which will initially last for three months, is intended to initiate the complete winding down of US development aid and is the latest high point in a campaign by Trump and his 'government efficiency' adviser, Elon Musk, against government agencies that they believe are not contributing to Trump's 'MAGA' ('Make America Great Again') agenda.



## Musk and Trump attack USAID as insane and criminal

USAID is particularly in the spotlight for its austerity measures because the agency spends US taxpayer money abroad without directly providing anything in return. Trump recently called the management of the internationally highly esteemed agency 'a [bunch of radical lunatics](#)'. Musk even branded USAID a '[criminal organisation](#)' that 'has outlived its

usefulness'. Almost 6,000 employees worldwide have since been laid off or sent on forced leave. Numerous lawsuits are currently pending against the closure of the agency. However, the prospects of success are uncertain.

## **USA previously paid 40 percent of global development aid**

What is already clear, however, is that the damage caused by the halt to all programmes is immense, because US development aid [previously accounted for more than 40 percent of total humanitarian aid](#) from all countries combined. USAID programmes in over 100 countries range from health assistance for women in conflict areas, to financing wells for clean water and HIV/AIDS treatment, to fighting corruption and financing nature conservation projects.

## **Outstanding role for nature conservation**

U.S. development aid plays a little-known but outstanding role in nature conservation. With its discontinuation, dozens of projects worldwide for the protection of wildlife and ecosystems are at risk: from endangered turtles in the world's oceans to rainforests in Asia and elephants, lions and rhinos in Africa.

## **The USA recognised early on that nature conservation helps to combat poverty and disease.**

Until recently, USAID explained on its website why nature conservation has been financed from the development budget: 'USAID's biodiversity policy reflects our recognition of the essential role that healthy natural systems play in promoting resilient societies and fighting extreme poverty.' Nature conservation is not a luxury for the rich, but a necessity in the fight against poverty and the preservation of human development in the future. For decades, USAID has been arguing along these lines with international organisations and expert committees. The [World Economic Forum in Davos, for example, sees environmental](#) destruction and the overuse of the planet as the greatest long-term threat to humanity. Half of the world's economic output depends directly on an intact natural environment, the Forum's economists write. Even NATO has concluded [in a strategic threat assessment](#) that the loss of biodiversity has become a threat to global food production and water supply.

Instead of farsighted insights such as these, or the proud overview of global aid programmes against hunger, disease and environmental destruction that could previously be found there, for a good week now [the USAID website](#) has been providing the fired employees with information on the times at which they can collect their personal belongings left behind in the offices at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington after their sudden dismissal.



*The Tepui mountains in Chiribiquete National Park, Colombia. Many protected areas are financed by development funds. Photo: Daniel Rosengren*

## **Almost a billion dollars for nature conservation**

The proportion of USAID's funding that goes to conservation projects is relatively small compared to its humanitarian aid, at around \$400 million per year. However, because almost \$700 billion is needed worldwide each year to protect the natural environment, USAID's withdrawal is a substantial blow. According to OECD figures, the US recently spent a total of around \$900 million per year on international conservation, which will now be lost.

## **No one answers the phone or emails**

Because, in addition to USAID, other funding sources are also affected. For example, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has frozen its portfolio of international nature conservation funding in the three-digit million range. 'There, too, no one picks up the phone or answers emails from one day to the next,' says Christof Schenck, CEO of the Frankfurt Zoological Society (ZGF). As one of the largest international conservation organisations, FZS is severely affected by the change of course in the USA. It has received support from both USAID and USFWS.

*In all our projects, we are concerned not only with protecting animals, but also with preserving intact ecosystems on a large scale for people and nature.*

Christof Schenck, Frankfurt Zoological Society





© Like the Frankfurt Zoological

*Society, many conservation organisations depend on public funding. Photo: Daniel Rosengren*

## Programmes on all continents have been stopped

Schenck is full of praise for the professionalism of the US government to date. 'These are very competent people who really know the world well,' he says about the many years of cooperation. 'Other state donors could learn a lot from the professional, targeted and also financially very efficient funding,' says the conservationist.

Now, however, a high single-digit million sum is missing from his budget from one day to the next. At the ZGF alone, almost a dozen projects in five countries in Africa and Asia are affected. The spectrum ranges from supporting local communities in sustainable agriculture and projects to limit human-wildlife conflicts to conservation programmes for endangered species. Species conservation programmes are central to the work of the ZGF, because only if species such as tigers, elephants and rhinos, which have been brought to the brink of extinction by poaching, can take their place again, [will ecosystems](#) as a whole continue to function. 'In all our projects, we are concerned not only with preserving animals, but also with preserving intact ecosystems on a large scale for people and nature,' says Schenck.



*A sedated black rhino is treated in North Luangwa National Park, Zambia. The rhino was fitted with a radio transmitter in its horn. Photo: Daniel Rosengren*

One example is the North Luangwa National Park in Zambia. At almost 5,000 square kilometres, this protected area alone is twice the size of all 16 German national parks combined.

With the help of USAID and USFW, rhinos that had once been wiped out and had now been reintroduced could be further protected and programmes for sustainable land use and for conflict avoidance between humans and wildlife could be implemented. Like many other organisations, the ZGF is now trying to save its conservation programmes, some of which have been running for decades, by reallocating resources, making savings and looking for new donors. 'These developments are a big shock, but we won't be knocked over,' Schenck says confidently.

## **Are we facing a wave of extinctions and a new pandemic?**

Schenck is certain that the weakening of global nature conservation will nevertheless have dramatic consequences. 'The risk of further species becoming extinct has increased significantly,' believes the biologist. 'If protected areas are no longer financed and rangers have to be laid off, poaching, deforestation and habitat destruction will increase – this could mean the death knell for many endangered species.'

Schenck believes that the less than 300 Sumatran tigers still living, some of the rarest rhino species in Africa and the Ethiopian wolf are particularly at risk. In addition, there are many animal and plant species that could become extinct before humanity even knows of their existence. Schenck believes that the significance of these losses is underestimated. 'Perhaps we could have learned something from them, or used them?'





*A large part of the world's biodiversity is found in the tropical countries of the South. Here, a largely ecologically intact river in Benin, West Africa. These habitats can only be protected with international assistance. Photo: Thomas Krumenacker*

## **Trump is also the elephant in the room at the UN summit in Rome.**

The radical change of course under Trump is also dominating discussions in the corridors of the [second round of the World Nature Conference COP16](#), which was recently held in Rome. Although the US is not a member of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity – the twin agreement to the Paris Climate Treaty, which is designed to protect biodiversity and ecosystems worldwide – ‘However, the US programmes have supported the implementation of the objectives of the Biodiversity Convention with a lot of money,’ says Georg Schwede, European head of the nature conservation association Campaign for Nature. The loss of US funding also jeopardises the central promise made by the international community to developing countries to support them in their efforts to refrain from adding value by destroying nature, namely to provide them with \$20 billion annually for nature conservation.

## **Billions for defence instead of humanitarian aid and nature conservation**



The new course in Washington also has a massive indirect impact on the willingness of states to honour their international nature conservation commitments. 'The freezing of humanitarian aid immediately threatens hundreds of thousands of people,' says Schwede. 'It's understandable that other states are jumping into the breach.' However, the shifts in development budgets are often at the expense of nature and climate protection programmes.

But the changed political climate poses an even greater threat to international nature conservation. 'We are seeing a new set of priorities everywhere,' observes Schwede in Rome. 'Armaments, migration defence and incentives against the weakening economy dominate everything else'. Above all, Trump's announcement that he would no longer support Europe as a protective power in the event of a conflict with Russia has led to massive budget shifts. At the beginning of the week, the British government announced that it would be significantly increasing its defence spending. In order to raise the billions needed for this, [the development aid budget is to be cut by 40](#) per cent.



*Friedrich Merz in the Bundestag. The CDU/CSU calls for the abolition of the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in the current coalition negotiations. Photo: Deutscher Bundestag / Thomas Köhler / photothek*

## **In Germany, the course is being set these days**

In Germany, too, the signs point to further savings. In the current coalition [negotiations, the CDU and CSU](#) want to wind up the development ministry and integrate it into the foreign office. At the same time, the budget is to be massively cut. What few people know is that the development ministry also finances about 80 percent of all international nature and climate protection projects.

'If the funds that we have available for our partner countries are reduced, the partner countries will have to decide more clearly which areas we want to cooperate in,' Development State Secretary Jochen Flasbarth announced [several months](#) ago. 'In addition to the preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity, there are other priorities in developing countries: health, education and economic development. These are legitimate concerns,



and the less money there is, the more these concerns compete with the financing of nature conservation.'

## **Hope for natural heritage landscapes**

But there are also rays of hope. More than a dozen of the world's most ecologically valuable large-scale protected areas, known as legacy landscapes, will survive the current financial crisis for nature largely unscathed. To ensure their long-term protection, independently of current political crises, governments and private organisations have created a natural heritage fund of their own, the income from which can be used to finance conservation measures on a permanent basis. These protected areas were always intended 'to ensure that the lights do not go out in a natural crisis,' says ZGF manager Schenck. 'In difficult times, they shine particularly brightly.'