

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für  
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development  
Institute

“Make biodiversity great again!”

By Carmen Richerzhagen,  
*German Development Institute /  
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*  
and Marianne Alker  
*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale  
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)*

# The Current Column

of 22 May 2017

## “Make biodiversity great again!”

Bonn, 22 May 2017. The 22 May is International Day for Biological Diversity. This is the first time Donald Trump is experiencing this day as US President. What we have heard from him so far in connection with environmental protection has not been positive. He considers climate change to be a hoax invented by the Chinese. He describes environmental assessments as laborious, long and terrible approval processes, and intends to make massive cuts to the US Environmental Protection Agency, which he has appointed a friend of the coal and oil industry to oversee. Likewise, he does not appear to be interested in the conservation of biodiversity. He recently antagonised conservation organisations by attempting to prevent an endangered species of bumblebee being placed under protection, as this measure had been introduced under Obama. Several lawsuits have since been filed against Trump for violation of environmental legislation. There are many reasons for Donald Trump to advocate for environmental and, in particular, biodiversity conservation, and not only to protect the *Neopalpa donaldtrumpi*, a species of moth named after him. Like the rest of the world, the United States, the US private sector and Donald Trump himself are beneficiaries of biodiversity and consequently reliant on its preservation.

This year's International Day for Biological Diversity is focusing on tourism. Ecotourism, adventure travel and nature tourism are experiencing a boom. Unspoilt, beautiful landscapes, mountain ranges, coasts, beaches, dunes, oceans, forests and meadows provide the backdrop for the packages on offer. For many people, nature experiences such as safaris, hikes through national parks and snorkelling along coral reefs are among some of their best holiday memories. But this biodiversity is under threat around the globe. It is estimated that up to 380 plant and animal species become extinct every day. Brazil, South Africa, DR Congo, Indonesia and the United States are five of the world's 17 megadiversity countries, which together are home to 70 per cent of the world's terrestrial flora and fauna. Tourism can have a considerable negative impact on biodiversity if habitats are destroyed and polluted, as in Cancún, Mexico for example, where large mangrove and forest areas have been cleared to make room for tourism development. The tourist industry has seen rapid growth over the past two decades; the number of international tourist arrivals has been increasing by an average of 4.2 per cent each year,

with no end in sight. As such, the pressure on biodiversity from tourism is set to rise further in future. Consequently, it is important to take an integrated approach to the conservation and sustainable use of nature in tourism.

There are enough sound economic arguments to prick even the ears of a businessman like Trump. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that over three million jobs in the United States' 59 national parks (including Yellowstone and Grand Canyon) depend on tourism, with almost USD 35 billion generated in revenue from the parks in 2016. Trump's Florida estate is not far from the Everglades, a huge swamp and conservation area with endangered status, and a popular tourism destination. His luxury hotels in Hawaii and Florida are located in the middle of biodiversity hotspots. And there are other sectors of the US economy which also depend on biodiversity, not least the US pharmaceutical and biotechnology industry, the largest in the world. Many profitable products are based on plants and plant substances discovered in biodiversity hotspots. The greater the variety of flora, the greater the likelihood that new discoveries will be made. These are strong arguments for Donald Trump to stop the loss of biodiversity and work, for example, to promote sustainable, environmentally responsible tourism.

As US President, Trump's influence on the environment is now far greater than researchers assumed when they developed the Trump Index over 15 years ago. Using an individual's income level and consumption patterns, this index measures the contribution made by that person to environmental destruction. It was concluded back then that one “Trump” caused about as much environmental damage as several million Mumbai residents. The index does not take account of political power, but this is now being exercised by Donald Trump. So far, no US President has managed to ratify the Convention on Biological Diversity, adopted at the United Nations back in 1992 and signed by all other countries of the world. He has an opportunity here to stand out from his predecessors and pleasantly surprise the world and the environment alike. This would provide fresh dynamism to international efforts on biodiversity conservation, something which would also be good for the United States. “Biodiversity first!” is the only way forward.