

Global Challenges

Claudia A. McMurray

Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans, Environment, and Science



Claudia A. McMurray

The State Department's Bureau of Oceans, Environment, and Science (OES) works on a broad portfolio that includes some of the most important challenges of our time: climate change, pandemic influenza, providing clean energy and safe drinking water to developing nations, and saving our oceans, forests, and wildlife.

U.S. Department of State

Never before have these issues been more critical to our diplomacy. As Secretary Rice has noted: "In this world, it is impossible to draw neat, clear lines between our security interests, our development efforts, and our democratic ideals. American diplomacy must integrate and advance all of these goals together." America's global leadership on environment, science, and health issues is an essential tool for answering today's problems.

Our agenda, while diverse, is driven by three key areas of focus. First, certain issues are so critical that they command our immediate attention. These include the urgent task of working to prevent or mitigate the risk of an avian flu pandemic and addressing climate change in a manner that will support energy independence for the United States and our allies. Second, our bureau is charged with representing the United States as a party to a large number of treaties dealing with environmental and natural resource issues. These are important legal obligations, and we take them very seriously. Finally, the bureau has created and maintains several collaborative international partnerships to promote scientific cooperation, environmental protection, and natural resource conservation.

Critical Issues

To address a potential avian flu pandemic, the Department of State coordinates the activities of the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza established in 2006. This partnership brings together key nations and international organizations to improve global readiness by coordinating efforts, mobilizing resources, and building capacity to identify, contain, and respond to a pandemic.

We are working to address the equally pressing issue of climate change on a number of fronts. For example, in 2006 we launched the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate with five key nations—Australia, China, India, Japan, and South Korea. These countries account for about half of the world's population and more than half of the world's energy use and greenhouse gas emissions. This effort was groundbreaking because it represents the first time that we have been able to address climate change with some of these countries in a practical, focused, and supportive way. Through this initiative, partner nations will meet real commitments by real deadlines.

Treaties and Other International Agreements

The bureau also represents the United States as a party to a number of international treaties. One such treaty is the Montreal Protocol, which aims to ban the manufacture and use of certain chemicals that destroy the earth's protective ozone layer.

Since 1987, the 189 countries that are parties to the protocol have phased out more than 92 percent of the ozone-depleting substances covered by the treaty. It is truly remarkable that in less than 20 years, the international community has been able to phase out these extremely useful but harmful chemicals and find replacement

products that do not damage the atmosphere. As a result of our efforts and the efforts of many other countries across the globe, an estimated 20 million cases of skin cancer have been prevented.

Another set of treaties on which the bureau leads concerns fisheries and other living marine resources. These agreements seek to reverse the overfishing that has depleted many fish stocks and thus ensure a sustainable supply of fish for consumers while protecting the ocean environment from destructive fishing practices. In 2006, the United States led the development of measures to address problems that beset many international fisheries, including overfishing and the excess fishing capacity of the world's fleets. The United States, through OES, is also a leader in the regime created by the Antarctic Treaty and will host the historic 50th meeting of parties to the regime in 2009.

Partnerships

Although a good deal of our time is consumed with urgent issues and treaties, we also use key public-private partnerships to solve international problems. Partnerships such as the Clean Energy Initiative, the Water for the Poor Initiative, the President's Initiative Against Illegal Logging, and the Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking provide a critical link between internationally agreed environmental goals and the practical solutions needed to reach them.

For example, the Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles is improving air quality and the health of millions—especially children—around the world. In countries such as Mexico, Chile, Thailand, China, and India, we work to reduce the harm to health and the environment from leaded gasoline and obsolete diesel engines. In adults, lead poisoning causes a number of serious health problems. For children, it can mean organ

failure, mental retardation, and even death.

We have already achieved tremendous results in the developing world. Through the efforts of this partnership, all 49 sub-Saharan African countries stopped refining and importing leaded gasoline during 2005. Through this single program, we have managed to affect the health of 733 million people in a positive way.

The United States has been a leader internationally in seeking to facilitate efforts to reduce risks associated with exposure to mercury, a developmental neurotoxin of particular concern to pregnant women, nursing mothers, and children. Five partnerships were established in 2005

to begin addressing some of the most important sources of mercury pollution, including work to transfer technology that can remove mercury from coal-fired power plant emissions, as well as efforts to reduce the use of mercury in small-scale gold and silver mining that takes place in some of the world's poorest communities.

In that region, we have also worked closely with USAID to implement the Water for the Poor Initiative, which seeks to improve access to clean water and sanitation services. The U.S. Congress reinforced our mandate by passing the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, which required the State Department to develop an overall strategy to ensure access to safe water and sanitation in developing countries. In the next few years, the bureau will focus on building capacity in developing countries through regional institutions and on lowering institutional



© Wildlife Conservation Society



© AP Images/Marcelo Ruschel



© AP Images/Jon Hrusa

(1) Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans, Environment, and Science (OES) Claudia A. McMurray played a key role in facilitating the transfer of this orphaned snow leopard cub from the Naltar valley in northern Pakistan to a temporary home at the Bronx Zoo in New York City.

(2) OES plays a critical role in the conservation of the world's marine mammals, promoting bilateral agreements to protect endangered species, and guiding U.S. negotiations in cooperative management bodies such as the International Whaling Commission. (3) The Administration's new initiative to build a global Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking coordinates efforts to protect animals such as this African elephant.



© AP Images/NASA TV

The science offices within OES include International Health and Biodefense, Science and Technology Cooperation, and Space and Advanced Technologies, which has negotiated treaties committing countries to the peaceful use of space, limitation of space debris, global positioning and navigation systems, communications satellites, putting the “international” in the International Space Station, and others.

barriers for improved access to clean water.

Through several partnerships, OES works to protect natural resources. For example, we launched the Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking, which aims to halt the illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife parts.

This \$10 billion illegal trade presents a tremendous threat to wildlife conservation efforts around the world. It affects human life as well—encouraging organized crime and posing a threat to health from animal diseases that spread to humans.

Our first efforts have been focused on law enforcement in Southeast Asia, as this region is the center for the largest amount of illegal trade. We have spearheaded an effort by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to develop a network of law enforcement to arrest and prosecute wildlife smugglers. This initiative is still young, but among its successes has been the return of 54 smuggled orangutans to their native habitat through the collaborative efforts of law enforcement officials from Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

The coalition is also designed to raise public awareness. President Bush has discussed wildlife trafficking at several international meetings, including the summit of the G-8 leaders and summits with President Lula of Brazil and Prime Minister Singh of India. On the domestic front, Bo Derek, as the secretary of state’s special envoy on wildlife trafficking issues, and OES staff have visited several cities to educate American consumers on how to recognize and avoid

products that contribute to the illegal trade in wildlife.

Through science and technology partnerships, we are promoting the sustainable development of—and solidifying our relationships with—key countries, such as those in the Middle East. Our work on biodefense strengthens our nation’s ability to guard against naturally occurring epidemics, as well as bioterrorism. By collaborating on earth observations, our partners and we are applying space and advanced technologies to some of the most pressing challenges on the planet, such as climate change and water and natural resource management.

To protect Africa’s precious forest resources, OES launched the most ambitious and largest conservation project ever undertaken in Africa, the Congo Basin Forest Partnership.

The Congo Basin Partnership marks a commitment by the United States, the international community, and the countries of the Congo Basin to establish networks of protected areas across central Africa. The partnership works to conserve one of the two largest tropical forests by combating illegal logging and by offering local people a stake in the conservation of their resources.

In the three years since the launch of this initiative, we have made great strides toward preserving this globally important ecosystem. Gabon has established 13 national parks covering 11 percent of the country. In Equatorial Guinea, 500,000 hectares of logging concessions were transformed into a national forest, making it the country with the highest percentage of protected area in the world. Cameroon declared a 900,000-hectare tract—one of the last large intact forest blocks in that country—a protected area, and imposed a moratorium on granting logging concessions there.

It may seem counterintuitive to link the preservation of these forests to our larger diplomatic agenda. But there is a connection. Setting aside swaths of open space and improving the livelihoods of those who take care of it, serve as a reminder of our common natural heritage and sows the seeds of good will between the United States and the developing world.

The successes cited here and other ongoing international commitments give us reason to be hopeful, but there is much work still to be done. We remain dedicated to promoting environmental protection and good governance, both at home and abroad, so that future generations can enjoy the vast resources of this planet. ■

<http://www.state.gov/goes/>