

September 5, 2022

# Wild Treasure Troves of Life

## German Environmental Award for Dr. Christof Schenck

**Osnabrück. Protecting and preserving vast areas of wilderness from human intervention is something that biologist Dr. Christof Schenck (60) has been campaigning for successfully for decades. He is particularly committed to protecting huge national parks in the tropical rainforests of the Amazon, the Congo Basin, and Southeast Asia. The German Federal Environmental Foundation (DBU—Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt) is honoring this achievement with this year’s German Environmental Award, one of Europe’s most prestigious awards, which will be presented for the 30th time in 2022. Schenck will share the total prize fund of 500,000 euros with the entrepreneurs Friedrich Mewis and Dirk Lehmann. President of Germany Frank-Walter Steinmeier will present the 2022 German Environmental Award in Magdeburg on October 30.**

### *Wilderness Protection as a Lever Against Extinction of Species and Climate Change*

Schenck aims to protect biodiversity hotspots from the grip of economic interests in the long term, while ensuring the sustainable development and financial security of the local population. DBU Secretary General Alexander Bonde: “Dr. Christof Schenck has shown how decades of structured wilderness protection can curb the current global crises—extinction of species and climate change. Protecting the last great refuges of wilderness not only helps many different species of animals and plants, but also humans.”

### *Internationally Renowned Organization*

Under the stewardship of Schenck as Managing Director, the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) has grown into an internationally renowned organization with more than 1,200 employees worldwide and is involved in 31 conservation projects in 18 countries across four continents. Crucial here, according to Bonde, is “Schenck’s courage to think and act with the big picture in mind”. Some protected areas are as large as Switzerland and have ten times more biodiversity than Central Europe. “Preserving biodiversity hotspots in tropical rainforests despite economic interests has a crucial role to play in global climate protection—the best example of this is in the Amazon, which is the green lung of our world,” says Bonde. The ongoing deforestation there is approaching a tipping point, which will have dramatic global repercussions.

Experts estimate that rainforest loss of 20 to 25 percent in the Amazon would lead to an unstoppable process of dying off. “The figure is currently at around 18 percent,” says Schenck.



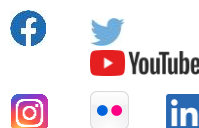
**Wilderness conservationist**  
Christof Schenck  
Photo: ©Jeldrik Schröder/FZS

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Klaus Jongebloed  
Kerstin Heemann  
Lea Kessens

**DBU Press Office**

An der Bornau 2  
49090 Osnabrück  
Germany  
Telephone: +49-541-9633-521  
Mobile: +49-171-3812-888  
[presse@dbu.de](mailto:presse@dbu.de)  
[www.dbu.de](http://www.dbu.de)



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### *Long-Term Conservation of Natural World Heritage Sites for Future Generations*

Schenck, who grew up in the Black Forest region is an “unwavering visionary who wants to ensure the long-term preservation of our World Heritage Sites for future generations,” says Bonde. With fact-based arguments and a great deal of passion, he is able to get financially strong decision-makers from politics and society on board. He strategically shaped the work of the FZS, which was founded in 1858, based on this, and, according to Bonde, expanded it “to incorporate a political and economic dimension”. The FZS had more than 7,000 sponsors in 2021, who invested around 25 million euros in their nature conservation projects. “During difficult times, in particular, it is clear how vital close and strong partnerships are for the effective protection of national parks—especially in crisis-torn areas,” says Schenck.

### *Nature Conservation Work as a Key Factor in Sustainable Development*

Schenck points to the example of Gonarezhou National Park in Zimbabwe to illustrate the influence of the FZS. Schenck, who has a strong international network of connections, says that an American foundation that “had already supported us in Tanzania” asked to be involved in the management. “With our support, this park has gone from being completely desolate to one of the best-managed parks in southern Africa in the course of 13 years,” says Schenck. Two factors are particularly important to him in FZS projects: first, the ability to act independently of the donor, and, second, the agreement of the country in question —“ without, however, having a fig leaf effect to cover things up,” says Schenck. “The park is now one of the largest employers in the region and is well accepted among the local villages.” DBU Secretary General Bonde adds: “Conservation work is a key factor here for sustainable development and stability in the Global South.”

### *The Federal Government’s International Natural Heritage Trust Comes from Schenck’s Think Tank*

Schenck focuses his work on existing world heritage sites, “as these are melting away like ice in the sun”. Worldwide, according to the World Biodiversity Council (IPBES), 150 animal and plant species become extinct every day. Intact ecosystems are being lost and with them the essential conditions for life, such as clean air, pure water, and uncontaminated soil. “To ensure a gold standard of nature conservation and functionality for humans, basic funding for the top national parks is necessary,” says Schenck. The parks are currently reliant on fluctuating funds from governments, donors, organizations, and tourism. However, in times of crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic, sources of income like tourism can dry up overnight. Schenck’s FZS team therefore came up with a remedy concept—an international natural heritage trust called the *Legacy Landscapes Fund* (LLF). Schenck: “You set up a capital stock and live off the income, just like foundations do.” The Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development took up the idea last year and set up an international competition to secure 30 top wildlife conservation areas through this type of core funding—“with a view toward eternity”, as Schenck explains. The biologist, who spent three years researching giant otters in the Peruvian jungle of Manu National Park in the early stage of his career, does not fall into despair about the man-made crises: “If we got ourselves into this, then we can get ourselves out of it,” he says. “Our time window is rapidly fading away right now. Everything we do now protects us from worse disasters happening in the future.”

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| <p><b>Nr. 109/2022</b><br/>Klaus Jongebloed<br/>Kerstin Heemann<br/>Lea Kessens</p> | <p><b>DBU Press Office</b><br/>An der Bornau 2<br/>49090 Osnabrück<br/>Germany<br/>Telephone: +49-541-9633-521<br/>Mobile: +49-171-3812-888<br/><a href="mailto:presse@dbu.de">presse@dbu.de</a><br/><a href="http://www.dbu.de">www.dbu.de</a></p> | <p>  <br/>  <br/><b>#uwp22</b></p> |  |
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