

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony of

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Progress and Potential: The African Elephant and Rhino and Tiger Conservation Funds

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear here today. I am Ginette Hemley, Director of International Wildlife Policy at World Wildlife Fund. WWF is the largest private conservation organization working internationally to protect wildlife and wildlife habitats. We currently support conservation efforts in more than 70 countries, including many key African elephant range states and almost all range states for tigers and rhinos.

We are here to evaluate the effectiveness of the African Elephant Conservation Act (AECA) of 1988 and the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act of 1994. I would like today to review what these laws have accomplished to date, and their importance for future conservation initiatives.

First, I want to express WWF's appreciation for the concern and interest that this Subcommittee has shown for the conservation of these species, three of the world's most magnificent and visible symbols for global conservation. We want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing, and we applaud the Subcommittee for taking a leadership role in securing passage of both the African Elephant Conservation Act and Rhino and Tiger Conservation Act. We also want to note in particular the important roles of Representatives Beilenson, Studds, and Fields, who are appearing today. You have our special thanks for helping lead the initial effort in Congress in 1988 on behalf of the African elephant, and more recently on behalf of rhinos and tigers.

The African Elephant Conservation Act

WWF first testified before the House regarding elephant conservation on June 22, 1988 -- eight years ago almost to the day. At that time, a dramatic decline in many elephant populations over the course of a decade had precipitated enormous concern among African nations and the global conservation community. From an estimated 1.2 million animals in 1979, elephant numbers dropped to about 600,000 by the late 1980s, a decline of as much as 50 percent in just ten years. Shrinking habitat and conflict with rapidly expanding human populations played a role in the decline, yet by the mid-1980s it was clear that the overwhelming factor in the steep drop in elephant populations was poaching for the illegal ivory trade.

During its peak just over a decade ago, as much as 800 tonnes of ivory were exported from Africa each year, equivalent to the deaths of up to 80,000 elephants annually. The losses were disproportionate, with some elephant populations in east and central Africa suffering devastating declines, while others fared better. In particular, elephants in several southern African countries were well insulated from the poaching assault, due to effective management and conservation programs.

CITES grappled unsuccessfully with the massive outflow of illegal ivory from the African continent, through an export quota system that ultimately failed to keep illicit ivory products out of global trade. The global response was the 1989 CITES ban on commercial ivory trade, a measure adopted by the vast majority of CITES member nations. Although controversial among some elephant range countries, the moratorium has proven important to the recovery of many of the elephant populations hit hardest by poaching. CITES will no doubt continue to debate the future of the ivory trade ban, as the African elephant clearly presents some of most challenging issues in wildlife conservation and management today, and the needs and

priorities associated with addressing these issues vary widely among African countries.

The ivory trade ban was a stop gap measure targeted at a crisis situation. The issue we are discussing here, Mr. Chairman, which is in many ways more critical over the long term, is international funding for wildlife conservation programs. To this end, the African Elephant Conservation Act has played a crucial role. The Act established the African Elephant Conservation Fund and authorizes up to \$5 million per year for elephant conservation projects. Although the fund has never been appropriated to the fully authorized amount, it has proven an important instrument for helping African nations in their efforts to rebuild elephant populations hit hardest by poaching, as well as for addressing the growing array of elephant conservation and management needs throughout the continent.

To best understand the importance of monies provided from the AECA, one would have to consult with the governments and wildlife officials and experts of the 17 countries which have benefited from its support. A few of them are represented here today. WWF has conservation programs or projects in 16 African countries and oversees several projects which have been the direct recipients of support from the African elephant fund. Based on our own field reports and contact with experts across Africa, the fund has been an important source of support for projects that would otherwise not have been possible.

The African Elephant Fund, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, has provided about \$5 million over five years to elephant conservation activities in range states throughout Africa. Mr. Chairman, this is a very modest program -- \$5 million has supported 62 grants to 48 projects in 17 countries. In our view, the Service has been both efficient and effective in managing the elephant grants program.

Through many years of developing and managing international conservation programs and projects, we at WWF have learned many important lessons. One is that successful conservation initiatives require commitment and continuity. The African Elephant Conservation Fund has in fact been the only continuous source of new funding for African elephant conservation efforts since the 1989 ivory trade ban went into effect. Unfortunately, funding from other sources has proven erratic. In the immediate aftermath of the ivory trade ban, when the world was sensitized to the elephant's dilemma, funding flowed from various unilateral and multilateral bodies and NGOs to projects in many parts of Africa. Since then, much of it has dried up. A 1995 review cosponsored by WWF and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with support from the elephant fund, revealed that many African wildlife and parks departments have undergone massive budget cuts, sometimes on the order of 90 percent or more in four years, as was the case with Tanzania from 1989-1993. This not only underscores a very serious trend, but also makes the monies authorized by the AECA even more valuable and needed.

From WWF's perspective, some of the strengths of African Elephant Conservation grants program include: Emphasis on small grants. By emphasizing small grants, FWS is able to move monies relatively quickly with minimal bureaucracy, while also allowing for a wide spectrum of projects to be supported. The African elephant inhabits some 35 countries, and conservation needs and capacity vary widely. The Service has chosen to provide maximum reasonable flexibility by keeping grants small, while maintaining a broad focus to ensure that meritorious projects throughout sub-Saharan Africa are funded. On-the-ground focus. Virtually all monies coming from the fund go directly into the field where it is needed; just 3 percent goes for administration. Moreover, the Fish and Wildlife Service has been responsive to emerging needs, as witnessed in 1993 when an anthrax outbreak threatened Namibia's elephant population. Emergency assistance was provided from the African elephant fund, and helped head off a potential catastrophe.

Balanced set of projects. In the beginning, the African elephant fund supported mostly anti-poaching projects, as these were the immediate priority. Since then, we are encouraged that, while grants are still targeted at clear and identifiable needs, the fund supports not only anti-poaching but many other activities, such as elephant population research and censuses, efforts to mitigate elephant/human conflicts, investigations of the ivory trade and cataloging ivory stockpiles, elephant translocations, and identifying new techniques for elephant management.

Cooperation with range states. All FWS projects receive approval from the host country government before proceeding. We have found that there is a very clear process and commitment to consultation and, where possible, collaboration with African governments.

Matching funds. Since the elephant grants program was initiated in 1990, more than \$5 million in matching

contributions has been spent on the various projects supported -- more than a 1:1 match. In addition, the fund has played a catalytic role in larger initiatives, such as in the Central African Republic's Dzanga Sangha Reserve. In a major effort to protect important wildlife habitat and biodiversity by working with surrounding communities to link conservation with development needs, African elephant funds are used to support three teams of game scouts that patrol the reserve and combat poaching. In partnership with WWF and others, the U.S. government has been able to play a focused role in the conservation of this biologically-important area that is important for forest elephants and many other unique species.

U.S. Leadership. Last but not least, the AECA has allowed the U.S. to put its money where its mouth is, and to set an example for other countries to follow. The commitment of this Congress to ensuring a continuing source of support for these initiatives will be critical to the long-term viability of many elephant conservation initiatives.

The list of specific initiatives supported by the African Elephant Conservation Act is impressive, and I would encourage members to review it. These projects have provided critical seed money to new elephant conservation initiatives in Africa, provided supplemental funds for existing projects with needs that could not be met from other sources, and helped build conservation infrastructure within elephant range states. With projects receiving matching support organizations like WWF, Safari Club International, the Wildlife Conservation Society, and others, the African Elephant Conservation Fund has clearly multiplied its conservation benefits substantially. We urge Congress to continue its strong support for this important program.

The Rhino and Tiger Conservation Act

This Subcommittee is well aware of the crisis facing rhinos and tigers in the wild and the staggering declines these species have experienced. Ninety-five percent of the world's wild tigers have disappeared since the turn of the century, with losses to poaching accelerating over the past decade. Three tiger subspecies have become extinct in the past fifty years, with the remaining five subspecies now confined to scarce habitat fragments in their former range. Similarly, more than 95 percent of Africa's black rhinos have been lost, but in just two decades, down to fewer than 2,000 animals today. Asian rhinos have fared even worse -- recent reports indicate that the Sumatran rhino population, for example, has been cut in half in the past decade, with numbers now totaling fewer than 500 animals.

It is probably not necessary to provide more details on the seriousness of the situation. What is important is finding new resources for conservation and invigorating global efforts to protect remaining populations of these species. The most immediate threat to the survival of rhinos and tigers is poaching for the trade of their valuable body parts to East Asian medicinal markets. Stopping the illegal trade is fundamental to successful field conservation efforts, and is an issue that, fortunately, has received significant attention in the past three years, through both CITES and actions taken by the United States. Passage of the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Act was one indication of the seriousness with which both Congress and the Administration have addressed the issue.

Because the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Act is relatively new, its full potential to address the threats to these species has not yet been realized. The first appropriations for the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Fund just came through in the long-delayed FY1996 Interior spending bill. By following an approach similar to that used for the African Elephant Fund, the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Fund can prove equally effective. The Fish and Wildlife Service appears to be showing the same commitment to emphasizing small grants, looking for a balanced portfolio of projects and working with host government agencies and NGOs to identify priorities and allocate funds. We are encouraged by the positive responses WWF has received from partners in the field throughout Asia and Africa about the fund's creation. As our field colleagues report, it means a great deal in range states that the U.S. government again is demonstrating a global commitment by acting as a partner to help save these critically endangered species.

Protection of heavily-traded species such as tigers and rhinos must involve a multi-pronged approach focused on reinforcing conservation efforts around protected areas and strengthening trade controls at both the producing and consuming ends. The Rhino and Tiger Conservation Act recognizes this, allowing for funds to be used for activities that address on-the-ground habitat protection needs as well as trade threats outside of range countries. With recent breakthroughs in Asian consuming countries such as Taiwan, China,

and South Korea, largely the result of pressure from CITES and Pelly Amendment sanctions imposed by the United States, we are for the first time seeing important new commitments to wildlife trade enforcement in key tiger and rhino consuming countries. Funds from the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Act can help build on this important progress.

In the field, we have learned the hard way that successful conservation measures for critically endangered species do not come cheap or easy. But we also have learned that strategic investments and long-term commitments pay off. Earlier this year, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) reported that, for the first time in perhaps two decades, rhino populations throughout Africa are either stable or increasing in most areas, suggesting that recent investments have begun to show results. An important example is the Kenya Black Rhino Conservation and Management Plan, a Kenya Wildlife Service initiative supported by WWF and other organizations which aims to build conservation infrastructure and develop rhino sanctuaries. Kenya is well on its way to achieving its goal of 600 black rhinos in the country by the year 2000. In this program, a policy of intensive protection and management of several key populations in relatively small areas has been successful in increasing rhino numbers, to the point that surplus rhinos are used to re-stock larger areas of protected rhino habitat. The only downside of this approach is its costs -- this is a multi-year, multi-million dollar program. In a similar initiative in Zimbabwe, the translocation of rhinos to "Intensive Protection Zones" (IPZs) within established protected areas has proven important to conserving remaining black rhino populations. But, as in Kenya, the costs are significant -- the Zimbabwe government has said that it takes as much as \$600 per square kilometer to translocate, monitor, and maintain one animal, or about \$8,000 per animal per year. The Zimbabwe government is seeking several million dollars to implement this plan. Clearly, significant new funding is needed to secure remaining rhinos over the long run.

The Rhino and Tiger Conservation Fund can provide important new support for conservation efforts by building on some of the important successes already achieved as well as providing emergency monies to help head off disasters. It is important to remember that some of these species have weathered major crises before. The white rhino, for example, was nearly extirpated in South Africa at the turn of the century, but now numbers over 7,000 in that country, due to the high priority given wildlife conservation by both the state and private sectors. In the 1930s, poaching reduced the Siberian tiger population to 40-50 individuals before strict protection helped its numbers rebound to some 500 in the wild in the 1970s. The fact that the population has been reduced to fewer than 200 today is troubling but does not necessarily mean doom, as long as action is taken quickly and support is sustained. In fact, poaching levels have been dramatically reduced from the disastrous winter of 1993, and we are cautiously optimistic that the situation in the Russian Far East will continue to improve.

Since the passage of the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Act, WWF has collaborated with the Wildlife Conservation Society to develop a framework for identifying high priority areas and actions for conserving tigers in the wild. The plan addresses immediate and long-term threats to tigers throughout their range, taking into account the full array of habitat types and integrity, poaching pressures, management needs, and trade control and policy issues. I would like to submit a copy of our report for the record. WWF believes that some of the priorities identified might prove useful to the Fish and Wildlife Service as they implement grants under the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Fund. Some of these include:

- Developing conservation infrastructure for areas identified as critical tiger habitat, based on ecoregion, habitat integrity, and poaching and trade pressures; many of these areas include key parks and reserves, but also habitat units outside of protected areas;
- Funding surveys of tiger habitat areas not yet ranked in importance, so that their significance for tiger conservation can be assessed;
- Supporting the recently established Global Tiger Forum as an important multilateral mechanism for transboundary initiatives that are necessary to conserve many key tiger habitat areas;
- Strengthening regional wildlife training institutions to support tiger conservation training needs on a systematic basis;
- Strengthening CITES trade controls in key tiger range states and consumer nations, by supporting enforcement and training workshops, particularly in cross-border areas where priority tiger habitat is found; and
- Supporting efforts to work with traditional Chinese medicine communities in consuming countries, to disseminate information on tiger conservation needs, explore the use of substitute medicinal products, and

develop appropriate consumer messages to reduce demand for tiger products.

Many of the priorities identified in this tiger strategy apply to rhinos as well. In some areas in Asia, tigers and rhinos share core habitat; thus, strengthening anti-poaching measures and improving habitat management in key areas can benefit both species. For example Nepal's Chitwan and Royal Bardia national parks and Bhutan's Royal Manas National Park are important areas for both the Bengal tiger and the Indian rhino.

WWF hopes that these suggestions prove helpful to the Fish and Wildlife Service as the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Fund gets up and running. We look forward to the fund proving as successful as its African elephant counterpart.

The Future

WWF believes that the positive results of the projects supported by the African Elephant Conservation Fund and the enthusiasm expressed by our conservation partners in the field over establishment of the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Fund, are the most important signs of the strength of the acts that created them. They have allowed the U.S. to play a lead role where it really counts -- funding initiatives in range countries to help ensure the survival of these critically endangered species in the wild.

We understand that the Interior Appropriations bill for FY1997 contains \$1 million for the African Elephant Conservation Fund and \$400,000 for the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Fund. WWF strongly supports the increased appropriation and very much appreciates the action and foresight of the Appropriations Committee. As noted earlier, the elephant funds have generated more than matching support from other sources over the five years of the program's existence, and there is little question that many times the amount appropriated by Congress will come from the private sector and other sources for tiger and rhino conservation efforts. We hope that this year marks the beginning of an enhanced public-private partnership to preserve the African elephant, the tiger, and the world's rhinos for future generations.

Thank you.

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