

Testimony of Ian Somerhalder

Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs
Regarding the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Plan to Implement a Ban on the
Commercial Trade in Elephant Ivory and the Consequences of that Policy

Good morning Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Sablan, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Ian Somerhalder, an actor and founder of the Ian Somerhalder Foundation, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to empowering, educating, and collaborating with people to help them positively impact the planet and its creatures. I was also recently named a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for their environmental programs.

I would like to thank the Subcommittee for giving me the opportunity to speak here today and I'd like to especially thank Chairman Fleming, who represents my home state of Louisiana. I am honored to be able to speak to the need for redoubled efforts to protect rapidly declining populations of African elephants, wild habitats and wildlife. I appreciate and admire the field-based and policy work of Wildlife Conservation Society who continues to identify opportunities for me to have an impact on U.S. government conservation actions.

Some of you might remember my testimony from three years ago, when I first had the honor of addressing this Subcommittee in support of the Multinational Species Conservation Funds (MSCF). These funds play a critical role in saving wild populations of many of the world's most iconic species, including the African elephants that are the subject of today's hearing, by supporting programs that control poaching, reduce human-wildlife conflict, and protect essential habitat. The MSCF are due for reauthorization, and I encourage the Subcommittee to take up the bipartisan bills to extend these important programs – H.R. 39 and H.R. 1329, offered by Mr. Young and Mr. Pierluisi, two highly-respected Members of this Subcommittee, and H.R. 1328, offered by Congressman George Miller. I would also urge the Subcommittee to pass H.R. 262, which would extend the MSCF Semipostal Stamp, enabling the general public to continue to voluntarily provide funding for anti-poaching activities through purchases of the stamp.

As you all know, I'm not a policy expert or a park ranger. I come here today as a grateful amplifier representing a vast, global, interwoven tapestry of voices deeply invested in the future of our environment and its creatures. Because of our united and unending reverence for all vessels of life, the threat of ongoing habitat destruction and wildlife poaching is painfully all too real to us. I spent my childhood entangled with the raw, majestic ecosystem of rural Louisiana. From a very young age, my family instilled in me our obligation to protect this delicate balance. Even beyond that, they illuminated how there was no distinction between the ecosystem and myself. What I had perceived as "outside" was also inside. When the Gulf Oil Spill devastated the bayous I know as home, I became aware of just *how* true this really is. Refusing to surrender to a harrowing sense of vulnerability, I united with an international span of changemakers ready to heal and restore the planet and its creatures. These changemakers are the IS Foundation

family. Armed with compassion and equipped with a vast array of actionable skills, we knew our interdependent collaboration was necessary to reconcile both the environment we see as external as well as within. This understanding of our environment's ultimately borderless and symbiotic nature is pivotal to the work of ISF today.

I'm grateful and fortunate to have achieved success as an actor, and with that comes what I see as the privilege of being able to raise awareness about issues I am passionate about. As the founder of the Ian Somerhalder Foundation, I have committed my time and financial resources to advancing environmental causes, land and wildlife conservation, animal welfare and the empowerment of our youth. In my work with oceans, I came across a quotation that rings particularly true to me by the legendary explorer and documentary filmmaker Jacques Cousteau, who said, "People protect what they love." It is with that mindset that I am motivated to share my love and knowledge of the natural world with the American public and with all of you here today.

In my previous testimony, I called attention to several global priority species, including tigers, rhinoceroses, marine turtles, and the great apes. Today, I'd like to focus on the plight of elephants, both in Asia and Africa.

There's really only one word that can describe the situation of elephants in the wild today; they are in **crisis**. The characteristics that make elephants so iconic around the world – their beauty, majesty, and power – are precisely what make them so desirable to poachers. Quite frankly, there's no way to overstate how catastrophic the last few years have been for elephants. They are now under threat as never before by agents of transnational crime rings and terrorist organizations, who are mutilating helpless animals and murdering park rangers at a scale not seen since the international ivory ban went into effect.

For these criminals, the black market in illegal ivory is no different than that of drugs, weapons, and counterfeit goods – it's just more lucrative. Today, numerous research organizations and nonprofits report that the illegal wildlife trade is the fourth largest in the world, more sizable than the trafficking of small arms, diamonds, gold, and oil. In a study¹ released by the Stimson Center in January of this year, illegal wildlife trafficking was estimated to be worth \$19 billion. The same study reported that rhino horn (which is considered analogous to elephant tusks) is now worth about \$50,000 per pound, more than gold or platinum.

As a rule of thumb, wildlife is most vulnerable in regions where the rule of law is weakest. Therefore, it stands to reason that Dr. Iain Douglas-Hamilton², Founder of Save

¹ Berganas, J. (2014) *Killing Animals, Buying Arms: Setting the Stage for Collaborative Solutions to Poaching and Wildlife Crime*. Washington, DC: The Stimson Center.
http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/killing_animals_buying_arms_WEB.pdf

² Douglas-Hamilton, I. (2012) *Ivory and Insecurity: The Global Implications of Poaching in Africa*. Washington, DC: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate.
<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/>

the Elephants, testified before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations that central Africa has been the most severely impacted by the dramatic increase in elephant poaching, losing more than half of its elephants in the last decade. The most current studies done by the Wildlife Conservation Society show that in 2012 alone, poachers killed approximately 35,000 African elephants for their tusks. At this rate, African forest elephants will be extinct in another ten years, and East Africa's savannah elephants will be right behind them.

When we see an elephant, we are inspired with a special sort of wonder and reverence. They are truly amazing animals. Elephants live in close-knit families and can only be separated by death or by capture. When an elephant dies, it is mourned and buried by other members of the tribe. They are the only mammals besides humans that are known to have rituals for death. Elephants have been observed responding to the distress of other humans and animals by protecting them or intervening in harmful situations. The saying, "An elephant never forgets," has been backed up by neuroscience, which has identified neural structures similar to dolphins, humans, and the great apes. Elephants use tools, exhibit self-awareness, engage in collaborative problem-solving and an especially talented elephant named Shanthi here at the National Zoo in DC can even play the harmonica and horn instruments.

What will the world look like without elephants? How can we ever justify allowing this species, which is considered to be as intelligent as dolphins and the great apes, to become extinct?

The situation is dire. The aforementioned Stimson Center report, *Killing Animals, Buying Arms*, cites Kenya Wildlife Service park rangers as describing their efforts against poachers as a war that they are losing. There is growing evidence that organizations like the Lord's Resistance Army and al-Shabaab fund terrorist attacks, recruitment efforts, guns and explosives with the proceeds of illegal ivory sales. Decades of war and instability in Central Africa have created a power vacuum in which these actors are free to do more or less whatever they want, from poaching to illegal mining to enlisting child soldiers to trafficking in sex slaves.

There is no reason for us to give up hope. The desperation and greed driving elephant poaching and illegal ivory sales can be reversed. There is ample evidence that funding conservation efforts has a significant and positive impact in protecting wildlife and the humans tasked with guarding them. Research by the Wildlife Conservation Society shows that forest elephant densities, the most threatened subspecies found in Central Africa, are seven times higher where they are protected.³ Ian Douglas-Hamilton, who I mentioned earlier, also described the slaughter of elephants and other endangered wildlife as largely opportunistic, with poachers "target[ing] the softest populations... mov[ing] from one population to another."⁴ Clearly, protective forces act as a deterrent when adequately staffed, trained, and armed. The support of U.S. governmental agencies like

³ *The Elephant Poaching Crisis: A Call for Action*. Washington, DC: The Wildlife Conservation Society.

⁴ Douglas-Hamilton, I. *Ibid*.

the Fish and Wildlife Service through the Multinational Species Conservation Funds and U.S. Agency for International Development play an absolutely essential role in supporting conservation forces internationally, from assisting in training eco-guards and supporting prosecutions to bolstering surveillance of key border crossings and investigating financial assets and much, much more.

There is also reason to hope that we can have an impact on reducing the demand for ivory and other endangered species products as well. All the research by governmental and non-profit organizations indicates that most illegal ivory is sold to the Chinese market. Far from being dispassionate to the plight of elephants, however, the Chinese government strictly protects its own forest elephants.⁵ What this would suggest to me is that there's a fundamental lack of understanding about the connection between the large-scale poaching of elephants (and rhinoceroses, for that matter), and the presence of ivory in the form of trinkets and potions for commercial sale. I see this as a personal challenge to raise awareness about the incredible costs of wildlife trafficking, and I hope that U.S. diplomacy will continue to work towards that goal as well.

Although China may be the biggest market, the United States is also one of the largest, ranking as high as number two worldwide in some assessments.⁶ This gives the U.S. the opportunity to lead the international community's response to the elephant poaching crisis – much as it did when this Congress passed the initial U.S. ban on the commercial ivory trade in 1988. Just a year after passage of that important legislation, the international community agreed to a similar ban on the global trade in ivory. The actions of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to tighten the U.S. ban on the commercial trade in ivory are critically important, not just to ensure that the U.S. will no longer be a destination for illegal ivory, but to show the international community – and China in particular – that the U.S. is absolutely serious about confronting the mass poaching of elephants and is willing to assume the leadership role once again to shutdown the demand for illicit ivory products.

If we do not lead, who will? And if we do not lead now, how much longer will there still be elephants left to save? When I reach out to my followers on social media about elephant poaching and wildlife trafficking, the response is powerful and positive. Retweets and favorites on Twitter number in the thousands, and the response on Facebook is in the hundreds of thousands. The outpouring of emotion is strong, and the message is clear: the American people want decisive and meaningful action from their government. It's up to you to enforce tough laws and build global partnerships to promote global enforcement to address wildlife crimes.

Although I understand that the focus of this hearing is on the elephant poaching crisis and the ban on commercial trade in ivory, I'd like to take a moment to talk about a related topic that is under the jurisdiction of this Subcommittee that affects all wildlife, and that is the vital importance of protecting wild habitats, both at home and abroad.

⁵ Douglas-Hamilton, I. *Ibid.*

⁶ *Elephants in the Dust: The African Elephant Crisis*. United Nations Environment Programme, *et al.* http://www.unep.org/pdf/RRAivory_draft7.pdf

Since I last testified before this Subcommittee, I've had the opportunity to travel to parts of the world that are under mounting pressure from environmental and human threats. In particular, I've spent significant time over the last year in Africa, where desertification, agriculture, and urbanization have all played a role in displacing crucial grassland and forest landscapes that are the home to thousands of species, large and small.

There are many strategies for pursuing land conservation. Some organizations focus on protecting land- and seascapes with the greatest density of biodiversity, which include tropical rainforests, coral reefs, floodplains, and more. Other organizations focus on managing land- and seascapes that are the most productive in terms of agricultural and fishing output or mineral and timber resources. Regardless of the approach, strong governance structures are fundamental to protecting habitats and pursuing smart and sustainable land use management policies.

The plight of Great Ape species worldwide illustrates the importance of maintaining wild habitats. In Sumatra and Borneo, the orangutan is considered critically endangered due in large part to the decimation of tropical forests for logging and agricultural interests, both legal and illegal⁷. Their native habitat is increasingly fragmented by human activity, which results in an orangutan population that is at the same time more disparate and more concentrated. Consequently, unusual disruptions like disease, resource scarcity, or fire have an outsize impact on an already vulnerable population, making them unable to rebound from adversity. The splintering of a once-large population due to fragmentation also poses serious problems in maintaining genetic diversity, which is necessary for the species to remain strong and vital. Orangutans are not alone in this plight – gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos are similarly threatened by habitat disruption⁸.

As a nation, the United States also has an interest in promoting the political and economic stability of other countries throughout the world. Habitat conservation must take place in partnership with economic development, not at odds with it. Coastal communities will only become more vibrant and prosperous with clean water, unpolluted beaches, and carefully managed fisheries. At times, conservation programs are even synonymous with economic revitalization. As Dr. John Robinson, Executive Vice President of Conservation and Science at the Wildlife Conservation Society, who testified alongside me in 2011,⁹ said, “Strengthening the Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo provided jobs for hundreds of rangers during that nation’s long civil war. These rangers both protected mountain gorillas and their habitat and helped control illegal logging and charcoal manufacturing that provided revenues to the insurgencies.” The illegal exploitation and trade in wildlife and natural resources that fuels regional conflict

⁷ *Orangutans*. WWF International. http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/endangered_species/great_apes/orangutans/

⁸ *Great Apes*. WWF International. http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/endangered_species/great_apes/

⁹ Robinson, J.G., (2011) *Legislative Hearing on H.R. 50, H.R. 1760, and H.R. 1761*. Washington, DC: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/>

and funds militias must be stopped by global enforcement efforts and proactive large landscape-level conservation.

Let me raise one more reason for taking a strong stance on protecting endangered habitats throughout the world. I, like so many people, have become the person I am today in relation to the natural world. Growing up in Louisiana left an indelible imprint on who I am as a person. I would venture to guess that it's the same for many of the distinguished members of this Subcommittee and their constituents, coming from such incredible natural landscapes as those seen in the Mariana Islands, Alaska, Guam, Puerto Rico, and each of your districts. It is my belief that we have a sacred responsibility to be stewards of the Earth, and especially of those regions whose survival hangs in such a delicate balance. Ultimately, to restore natural prosperity to these regions, we will have to invest in holistic solutions. At the IS Foundation, we are often asked why we don't localize our efforts into one particular need. Because we view the environment as one meticulously interconnected organism, we believe interconnected solutions are what truly create widespread and quantifiable change. After all, an organization that only focuses on saving endangered species is losing sight of the habitat restoration, waterway health, and economic change necessary to holistically fill that need.

I would like to add one more issue for consideration, and that is the emotional resonance that wildlife and habitat conservation has with the American people. The bald eagle, the American Bison and the Grand Canyon are as much icons of our great country as the values of liberty and justice for all. In my travels and interactions with people around the world, it has been made more than clear to me that animals like elephants, tigers, rhinoceroses, sea turtles, and the Great Apes illuminate the imagination and inspire compassion from all corners of the globe. The United States has an incredible opportunity to safeguard the long-term future of endangered species and landscapes while also investing in the political and economic stability of foreign nations.

On behalf of the Ian Somerhalder Foundation, I urge the Subcommittee to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Administration to quickly move ahead on tightening the ban on commercial ivory trade so that the United States can once again show its leadership in saving the African elephant. Thank you, again, for this opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.