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Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

fisheries - - Rep. Wayne Gilchrest, Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6232 - - (202) 226-0200

Witness Statement

The African Elephant Conservation Reauthorization Act
The Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Reauthorization Act
The Asian Elephant Conservation Reauthorization Act
Testimony of Ginette Hemley
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Before the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, and Oceans
House Committee on Resources
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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Ginette Hemley, Vice President for Species Conservation at World Wildlife Fund. WWF is the largest private conservation organization working internationally to protect wildlife and wildlife habitats. We currently sponsor conservation programs in more than 100 countries, thanks to the support of 1.2 million members in the United States and more than 5 million members worldwide.

We are here today to discuss conservation programs for some of the world's most threatened species--rhinos, tigers, and elephants. The United States, primarily through programs administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service, has played a critical role in the protection and conservation of these highly endangered species. World Wildlife Fund strongly urges that these programs be reauthorized, for the reasons outlined below.

Why These Programs Are Important

During the 1970s and 1980s, a major poaching crisis swept through parts of Africa and Asia, decimating populations of the African elephant, African and Asian rhinos, and the tiger. This poaching was driven primarily by a dramatic increase in global market demand for ivory for use as carvings and trinkets, and for rhino horn and tiger bone, which are highly valued ingredients in traditional Chinese medicine. The crisis was made worse in the 1990s by declining economies and political instability in many African and Asian range countries.

The statistics surrounding the wildlife losses were staggering. During the 1980s, half of Africa's elephants--perhaps half a million animals--were lost to poaching. Black rhinos dwindled from about 70,000 in 1970 to fewer than 2,500 animals by 1992, an astounding 95 percent loss in just two decades. The tiger population in India was reduced to fewer than 3,000 animals by the late 1980s, while Russia's Siberian tigers took a major hit in the early 1990s, with numbers falling by perhaps 40 percent to 250 animals by 1993. Although less in the media spotlight, the Asian elephant population in the wild has declined to about one-tenth the size of its

African cousin, to fewer than 50,000 animals, due to growing human population pressures in South and Southeast Asia.

Thanks to a broad international response, the situation for most of these species began to improve in the 1990s. CITES, the Convention on International Trade on Endangered Species, banned the ivory trade in 1989 and started to beef up enforcement efforts to stop the illegal trade of rhino and tiger parts. But stopping the trade was not enough. Direct action was needed on the ground to protect dwindling populations of these species, and the United States stepped in to help. Congress passed the African Elephant Conservation Act in 1988 to provide small grants to help African countries conserve their remaining elephant populations and help rebuild them. Since the African Elephant Conservation Fund was initiated in 1990, more than 120 grants have been awarded for projects in 22 countries, strengthening enforcement and trade control measures, protecting critical habitat, aiding training programs for park guard and wildlife managers, and assisting important elephant research, monitoring and survey efforts.

After ten years, these scientific and conservation efforts, together with the CITES ivory ban and collaborative programs supported by other governments, aid agencies, and NGOs, have helped African elephant populations begin to rebuild in some countries. Poaching levels are significantly reduced in some areas and illegal trade has slowed. In short, the African elephant is better off today than it was a decade ago, in part because of U.S. government support. Significant challenges remain, however, in part because of the eroding ability of many African governments to mount their own conservation efforts due to economic and political strife.

The success of the African Elephant Conservation Act led Congress to pass the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act in 1994. With the establishment of the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Fund, a steady stream of small but well-targeted grants have helped avert further losses of these species as well. In the past five years, we have seen signs of improvement in the status of tiger populations in Russia, Nepal, India, and elsewhere. Africa's black rhino has, for the first time in several years, experienced a modest increase in number in several places, and the white rhino, once threatened, is actually thriving in South Africa. Asian rhinos, representing some of the most endangered large mammals on Earth, have received invaluable assistance from the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Fund but remain severely at risk in parts of their remaining habitat fragments in South and Southeast Asia.

There is little question that the U.S. programs for tigers, rhinos and elephants, modest as they are, have helped avert disaster for these species--even possible extinction in some cases. They have helped developing country governments and NGOs build more effective conservation programs. They have truly had a multiplier effect, leveraging an impressive return on partner investments and providing an excellent example of public-private collaboration. But the task is not done. While we have begun to emerge from a period of crisis for some of these species, their long-term survival is still seriously at risk.

It is important to note that these conservation programs are critical not just to the species concerned, but also to Americans who appreciate and use them as symbols of strength and endurance. The Republican Party should be first among those to acknowledge the benefit of the elephant to its image. Saving these species is not just a biological imperative--elephants, tigers, and rhinos also have important social, economic, and cultural roles to play in American society.

The Broad Impact of Elephant, Rhino and Tiger Conservation Efforts

Elephants, rhinos, and tigers are not only threatened in their own right, they are flagships for the threatened

habitats and ecosystems in Africa and Asia in which they live, including some of the world's most unique and biologically diverse systems, such as tropical lowland forests. These large mammals require relatively large areas to survive, so by protecting them, thousands of other plant and animals species also are conserved. They are true "umbrella" species whose conservation benefits extend well beyond their own to whole communities of species.

Some of these large mammals also play an inordinately important role in the ecosystem--they are keystone species--and their survival is crucial for the survival of the system as a whole. Tigers, for example, are top predators, keeping populations of prey species in check, which in turn keep in balance the populations of the plants upon which they feed. By virtue of their size, feeding habitats, and movements, elephants actually shape the physical environment in which they live and so have a major influence on the plant and animal species around them. In short, when tigers and elephants thrive, the whole ecosystem thrives. When they suffer, the entire ecosystem suffers, including the people that live in or around it.

Recent Advances in Elephant, Rhino, and Tiger Conservation

Given the significant declines these species have experienced in recent years, a logical question to ask is, are their remaining populations and are the ecosystems in which these species live still viable? Significant study and debate surround the question of biological viability, and clearly massive declines or extirpation of a population in a particular area can be disruptive. But several points are important to consider. First, we have learned with both tigers and rhinos that a species can recover if habitat and food availability is sufficient and poaching is controlled. For example, the tiger population in the Russian Far East was once reduced to fewer than 40 animals in the 1940s due to uncontrolled hunting. Strict protection in an area where habitat and prey was abundant allowed the population to recover to around 400 by the 1980s. Similarly, the white rhino population in South Africa has grown to an astounding 9,700 animals today--the largest rhino population on Earth--from fewer than 100 animals at the turn of the century. Likewise, greater one-horned rhinos in Nepal, reduced to 100 or so in the 1960s due to overhunting, now thrive at more than 600 animals, enough to begin repopulating areas where they were extirpated thanks to strong protection by the Nepalese government and effective community-based conservation efforts. These success stories demonstrate that a species can come back, if sufficient and sustained protection is provided.

Thanks to increased international support for conservation activities, including from the FWS programs, the conservation community has begun to implement long-term strategies for the conservation of tigers, rhinos, elephants, and other large mammals. We are increasingly able to determine where our conservation investments will have the biggest long-term payoff. For example, a ground-breaking analysis undertaken by WWF, the Wildlife Conservation Society, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation/Exxon-Mobile Save the Tiger Fund, shared previously with this subcommittee, has prioritized remaining tiger populations and habitats across Asia based on habitat type and integrity, levels of disturbance, and other factors related to long-term viability. This analysis is helping to guide global tiger conservation efforts so that the most promising areas and populations receive priority attention. We know that we cannot save tigers everywhere, and that we must make trade-offs in our decisions. Similar analyses have been undertaken for Asian elephants and rhinos, and comparable regional efforts are underway for African elephants.

The conservation community has also come to recognize that, for many large mammals like tigers, rhinos, and elephants requiring large areas to maintain healthy populations, the current universe of parks and protected areas does not provide sufficient habitat for their long-term survival. That is, a large proportion of their populations--in some cases 50 percent or more--are found outside areas that receive official protection, so effective conservation efforts must extend throughout the entire landscape where the species lives and

moves. New approaches to conservation are encompassing larger areas than ever before--ecoregions and landscapes--and bringing together habitat protection, land-use planning, managed resource use, and community-based conservation in an integrated fashion that benefits both wildlife and people. In some cases, this includes undertaking efforts to restore forest corridors that connect parks and protected areas so that species like tigers, rhinos, and elephants can more easily disperse, breed, and establish new populations, enhancing their genetic viability and prospects for long-term survival.

The Unique Value of the Elephant, Rhino, and Tiger Funds

The situation for elephants, rhinos, and tigers remains serious, but it is far from hopeless. The progress of the last few years, thanks in part to the programs authorized by the African Elephant, Asian Elephant, and Rhino and Tiger Conservation Acts, demonstrate that, when reliable financial support is available and is used wisely, improvements can be rapid and dramatic. We know what needs to be done to save these species, and our conservation approaches and methodologies are becoming more effective and innovative every day. We have better data on these species and their critical habitats and stronger international collaboration than ever before. We must build on this important momentum.

The FWS programs for tigers, rhinos, and elephants have a number of unique features that underpin their effectiveness. These include:

· ***Leveraging significant conservation funding and support.*** The FWS reports that from 1990 through January 2001, about 240 grants totaling some $13.5 million have been awarded for elephant, tiger, and rhino projects. These together have leveraged almost $56 million in matching funds and in-kind contributions, a 4:1 return. In 1999 and 2000, 51 percent of the matching funds and in-kind contributions for tiger and rhino projects originated from the range countries. Few international conservation or aid programs are able to generate this level of matching or collateral support.

· ***Program administration with minimal bureaucracy and cost.*** To date, the elephant, rhino, and tiger grant programs have been administered at minimal cost--for less than four percent of the monies appropriated for the grant programs from 1990 to 2000. In fact, this amount has proven inadequate to cover the costs of full program administration, and subsidies have been needed from other FWS programs. Although these grant programs are relatively small, they include several important activities, such as developing and reviewing proposals and reports, issuing and tracking project contracts and payments, communicating with grantees and host governments, and tracking and monitoring projects. WWF supports amending the elephant, rhino, and tiger acts to ensure a modest increase in the allowance for administrative expenses so that the grant funds are administered with maximum effectiveness. We encourage the subcommittee to include the same language pertaining to administrative expenses as contained in the Great Ape Conservation Act of 2000, i.e. that the Secretary "may expend not more than three percent, or up to $80,000, whichever is greater, to pay the administrative expenses necessary…" We believe this is a more appropriate formula than now contained in the reauthorization bills under consideration today.

· ***Strengthening collaboration among NGOs and governments.*** As both a partner donor and implementing organization for various FWS-supported projects, WWF is acutely aware of the important role the elephant, rhino, and tiger programs have played in fostering collaboration among NGOs and governments. Many of the projects supported by these conservation funds involve multiple partners, and grants provided to NGOs receive approval from range country governments before they are awarded. The FWS programs have thus acted as a catalyst, not only for leveraging funding, but also for bringing important conservation players together in ways that enhance collaboration and conservation impact.

· ***Providing international leadership.*** By passing the African Elephant, Asian Elephant, and Rhino and Tiger Conservation Acts and implementing the programs they authorize, the U.S. Congress and FWS have together staked out important leadership roles in international conservation. This has helped bring the plight of these endangered species to the attention of governments worldwide, including both range and donor countries, which have increased their support for conservation programs accordingly. It has helped strengthen the activities of CITES in addressing key threats to these species. It has helped make these species a higher priority on policy and philanthropy agendas in the private sector, leading to increased public support for conservation programs.

· ***Increasing public awareness.*** Over the past decade, the American public's interest in and concern for the future of these endangered species has grown. This is clearly the result of the combined efforts of non-governmental organizations such as those testifying here today and the efforts of the FWS and Congress. All of us receive a regular stream of letters of concern about and in support of these species. There is little question that the American public cares deeply about the future of elephants, tigers, and rhinos, and expects and encourages us all to do more on their behalf. Public contributions to many of the organizations here today are a strong sign of the importance the public places on efforts to protect these species, and have enabled the private sector to work hand-in-hand with the government on conservation efforts.

The Rhino and Tiger Product Labeling Act

Recognizing the importance of the United States as a market for Asian medicinal products purporting to contain rhino and tiger ingredients, Congress amended the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Act in 1998 to include a specific prohibition on the import, export, and sale of any product for human consumption that contains or is labeled or advertised to contain tiger or rhino parts. This new law, consistent with a recommendation by CITES, was intended to facilitate enforcement efforts by shifting the burden of proof that a product actually contains these ingredients from the government to the trader or salesperson. The law also required, within 180 days of its passage, the initiation of an education program to inform consumers about the law and the plight of the species it is intended to protect. To date, we are aware of few activities undertaken by the FWS to begin such an education program, although several NGOs have offered to collaborate in these efforts in order to minimize the cost to the government. WWF encourages the subcommittee to confer with FWS on their plans for developing such a program in the future.

The Need for an Increase in Appropriations for the Multinational Species Fund

From 1990 to 2000, over 650 proposals have been submitted for funding by the elephant, rhino, and tiger programs. Of these, some 240 grants have been awarded. Clearly, the number of projects in need of funding outstrips the capacity of the FWS to support them. With the addition of two new programs--the Great Ape Conservation Fund and Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Fund--the total combined amount of funding authorized by Congress is $30 million. Last year, just $3.25 million was appropriated. WWF and other NGOs are seeking an increase in appropriations to $1.5 million for each fund, for a total $7.5 million. We believe that this increase is fully warranted because of the urgent conservation needs these species and their habitats face, the number of worthy projects that have gone without support, the addition of the two new funds, and the outstanding record of the FWS in administering the programs to date and the conservation results they have achieved.

It may interest the subcommittee that several of the NGOs represented here today are pursuing an initiative to augment the funding provided for these programs through a possible series of wildlife "semi-postal"

stamps produced by the U.S. Postal Service. Modeled after the highly-successful Breast Cancer Research Stamp, which has generated over $19 million in funding for government breast cancer research programs since its introduction in July 1998, a "Vanishing Wildlife" stamp series could help raise additional funds for these FWS programs. This could help shrink the gap between the Congressionally-authorized funding ceiling and the actual appropriation. Last year, Congress transferred authority for the approval of semi-postal stamps to the Postal Service, which is now preparing guidelines and criteria for a ten-year program. We would be grateful for the subcommittee's support in pursuing the wildlife semi-postal initiative and will keep you informed accordingly.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the subcommittee today. I will be happy to answer any questions.

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