

TESTIMONY OF IAN SOMERHALDER BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS AND INSULAR AFFAIRS, REGARDING H.R. 50, THE MULTINATIONAL SPECIES CONSERVATION FUNDS REAUTHORIZATION ACT

July 28, 2011

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 am also a global Ambassador for the Alliance for Global Conservation.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify before you today on H.R. 50, the Multinational Species Conservation Funds Reauthorization Act. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Subcommittee, especially Chairman Fleming—who represents my home state of Louisiana—for the invitation to join you today.

Wildlife and environmental conservation has always been not just a passion, but a priority of mine. When I began to find that through my work as an actor, I was gaining an increasingly prominent platform in front of the American public, I knew right away what I wanted to do with it. The IS Foundation is my attempt to use this opportunity, this share of the public's attention, for the greater good.

The IS Foundation, which now has dozens of affiliate groups around the world from as far off as India and Algeria, focuses its work around 3 themes: habitat conservation, species protection, and clean energy initiatives. Our goal is to support a range of projects, from more established, mature global initiatives like the Alliance for Global Conservation, to smaller, grassroots efforts initiated by individuals in the Gulf and other local communities. The hope is that we can demonstrate ways for everyone to contribute, on any scale. We want to start conversations on these issues and allow them to grow and evolve naturally. When a particular issue gathers enough interest and momentum, we'll lend the resources needed to transform it from a conversation into a project, and hopefully, eventually, from a project to real progress.

In talking to people, and especially young people, all over the country, I have found time and time again that the issue of species conservation is a particularly resonant one. People are passionately attached to the creatures that have captured their attention and their imaginations since childhood, and they are invested in doing whatever is necessary to protect them. Species conservation is beyond a doubt an issue that truly matters to the American public. We're lucky this is the case, because many of our most beloved wildlife species are clinging to survival by a thread.

This legislation initially enacted in 1990, is viewed globally a success story. With the US leading the effort, governments around the world are able to begin investing in their ecosystems. From the Congo to Southern Sudan we are finding that species conservation is paying off in terms of both the environment and local government action.

As Congress considers H.R. 50, I thought it would be useful to share my thoughts on the species that benefit from the US Fish and Wildlife Service leadership on conservation.

Tigers: Wild tigers are one such example—an amazing species under terrible threat by poachers and the gradual degradation of their habitat and prey base. According to big cat experts, only around 3,000 tigers exist in the wild today, and experts estimate that more than 500 tigers are killed each year. To make matters worse, the actual breeding population may be closer to a mere 1,000. Tigers are magnificent creatures: big, powerful, and charismatic. Unfortunately, these same qualities make them popular targets—the tiger's beautiful orange pelt commands a high price on the global black market, as do tiger body parts. Their organs and bones are used in Asian medicines, which are sold to consumers who believe these animal products convey strength, health and virility.

Rhinoceroses: Rhinos, too, hover on the brink of extinction. Between 1970 and 1992, rhino populations declined by 96%, and fewer than 2,400 black and white rhinos survived in the wild. Conservation biologists tell me that today only 300 Sumatran rhinos remain. The low number of survivors is exacerbated by the fact that many rhinos live in small, fragmented populations, which may not be viable due to lack of breeding opportunities and risk of random events or disease. Rhino horns are carved for dagger handles as a coveted status symbol in the Middle East, and body parts and bones are sold on the black market as medicinal ingredients. The illegal trade in animal parts is a profitable business, and the demand for these products creates an ongoing temptation for poachers. Rhinos, and tigers too, also fall inadvertent victim to poachers' snares, set to trap other animals for bushmeat or trophies.

African Elephants: African elephants are another species in terrible trouble. In the last century, rampant ivory poaching and habitat loss caused their numbers to drop from over ten million animals in 1900 to fewer than 500,000 by the late 1980s. Uncontrolled hunting and continued loss of habitat still threaten the African elephant today. In addition to the ivory and bushmeat trades, the loss of natural elephant habitat poses a major problem due to the resulting conflict between elephants and humans throughout Africa. As human populations grow and expand into remote areas, natural habitat is cleared and destroyed to make way for agriculture. Elephant populations are compressed into smaller ranges with limited food and water supplies. Hungry elephants wander into villages and damage crops. People often kill elephants in an attempt to stop the crop raids, and people themselves are also sometimes killed trying to fend off desperate elephants.

Asian elephants: Like their relatives, Asian elephants are also struggling to survive. In the United States, Asian elephants are best known as familiar circus attractions. Yet throughout their homeland, captive elephants are primarily beasts of burden. An estimated 16,000 Asian elephants are presently tamed and used for timber harvest, clearing forests, and agricultural development. Ironically, it is the destruction of forests, the advancement of agriculture, and the encroachment of human civilization that pose the greatest threats to the survival of Asia's wild elephants. Asian elephant populations have continued to decline due to loss of grazing areas and poaching driven by the ivory trade, and are listed as endangered on the Endangered Species Act.

Marine Turtles: Six of the seven marine turtle species are listed as threatened or endangered by the World Conservation Union and under the US Endangered Species Act. Because marine turtles require 10-40 years to reach sexual maturity and are vulnerable to predation, oil spills, and as by-catch, restoring their numbers is a lengthy and delicate task. Marine turtles are truly the ancient mariners of the world's oceans, with ancestors dating back over 100 million years. While all species require tropical, subtropical, or temperate oceanic beaches for nesting, each has specific marine habitat and feeding requirements. I was fortunate earlier this summer to travel to Trinidad and Tobago and watch leatherback turtles emerge from the sea under cover of darkness to lay their eggs and bury them in the sand. It was even more gratifying to see the hatchlings dig their way out of their sandy nest and instinctively find their way to the ocean... still unfortunately facing an uncertain future.

Great Apes such as gorillas and chimpanzees: Apes, by their nature, are extremely vulnerable. They have low population densities, grow relatively slowly, are long-lived, and have low reproductive rates and complex social relationships. Today, all the world's great ape species are threatened with extinction. Apes are susceptible to many of the same diseases as humans. As growing human populations penetrate further into ape habitat, the potential for disease transmission between apes and people, and vice versa, is increasing. As a result, the bushmeat trade poses a serious health risk for humans. Threats facing gorillas and chimpanzees include the loss, fragmentation and degradation of their habitat, as well as hunting for food, medicine and sport. Even with strong recovery programs, the chimpanzee population is 80% lower than 50 years ago, and it continues to drop.

Looking around the world at these wildlife, it's abundantly clear that humans have benefited from nature in so many ways but have also brought many species to the brink of extinction. Scientists warn us that we are on the cusp of the largest mass extinction spasm since the dinosaurs. The American people that I interact with through my IS Foundation work do not want to allow this to happen; they do not want to let these species go without a fight; and they see the way in which nature provides for people around the world. This is an issue that Americans care deeply about, and it is critical that the United States, as a world leader and global power, continue to lead the planet's efforts in global species conservation. Due to instability or indifference in the areas that many of these species call home, for most of them we are the first, last, and only hope

for survival. As the ones with the power to make a difference, the responsibility rests with us. It is imperative that we live up to it.

On behalf of the Ian Somerhalder Foundation and the Alliance for Global Conservation, I urge the Subcommittee to mark-up H.R. 50 and move to reauthorize this important piece of legislation.