

**TESTIMONY OF BENITO A. PEREZ, CHIEF, LAW ENFORCEMENT  
U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,  
BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON  
NATURAL RESOURCES, FISHERIES, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS  
SUBCOMMITTEE, ON U.S. CONSUMER DEMAND FOR WILDLIFE  
PRODUCTS THAT ARE TRADED ILLEGALLY OR UNSUSTAINABLY**

September 16, 2008

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Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Benito Perez, Chief of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Office of Law Enforcement. I am pleased to be here today to discuss our role in educating the public about illegal wildlife trade.

The Service is the lead Federal agency for wildlife law enforcement, including the enforcement of U.S. laws and treaties that regulate international wildlife trade. Our mandate includes inspecting wildlife imports and exports for compliance with U.S. wildlife laws and regulations; intercepting illegal shipments; and investigating and dismantling wildlife smuggling networks.

Our 120 wildlife inspectors, stationed at 38 U.S. ports of entry, focus exclusively on wildlife trade. Our 186 special agents investigate violations of all U.S. wildlife laws, including those that address global wildlife trafficking, throughout the country.<sup>1</sup>

### **Overview of Illegal Wildlife Trade**

Black market trade has long been recognized as a threat to wildlife worldwide. Despite global efforts to stem it that date back nearly four decades, illegal trade continues to thrive. More than 30,000 different animal and plant species now receive protection under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wildlife Fauna and Flora (CITES)<sup>2</sup> and since the early 1990s<sup>3</sup>, listings under CITES have increased by more than 75 percent.

Despite years of public outreach to discourage the consumption of protected species, demand persists and black markets flourish, even in the United States. The impact of such demand has been exacerbated by the globalization of the world economy, its population, and cultures. The ease of travel, transport, and transaction that characterizes the global marketplace has bolstered illegal wildlife trade, facilitating its conduct and foiling its detection. Over the past decade, interest in exotic locales as tourist destinations has increased, as has our ability to buy virtually anything we want from anywhere in the world just by visiting a website.

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<sup>1</sup> LE Staffing figures as of 7-16-08

<sup>2</sup> CITES website: <http://www.cites.org/eng/disc/species.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> USFWS Office of Law Enforcement Strategic Plan 2006-2010

Examples of wildlife products traded on the black market in the United States include beluga caviar, reptiles listed as threatened or endangered, elephant ivory carvings, sea turtle boots, illegally obtained tribal artifacts from the Amazon and Africa, sea turtle eggs and meat, and traditional medicines made from protected species.

### **Reducing Supply and Demand: Enforcement and Education**

All too often, consumers fail to count the cost to wildlife of the exotic items they purchase. Of course, some people who buy illegal wildlife and wildlife products simply do not care about the consequences to the species. A certain number, however, do not think about the nature of the transaction at hand, or they honestly do not know that their purchase makes them the last link in a chain of criminal activity that includes poachers, middlemen, smugglers, and retailers who are all stealing our natural heritage.

Those in law enforcement must deal with the challenge of people who do not care – particularly those whose indifference to conservation is apparent from their direct engagement in smuggling and selling protected species. Preventing illegal trafficking in global resources is a critical part of the Service’s mission. As resources are finite, we focus on core enforcement work in support of this goal. We recognize, however, that public outreach and education can help those who act in ignorance see that their business transactions and personal purchases contribute to a black market industry that is pushing species to the brink of extinction.

The Office of Law Enforcement Strategic Plan addresses this linkage directly. The plan establishes “Prevent[ing] the unlawful import/export ...of foreign fish, wildlife and plants” as a strategic goal and acknowledges that meeting this and other goals will depend in part on our success in “Provid[ing] outreach and education to increase compliance with wildlife laws.” Our work to combat global wildlife trafficking thus includes efforts to promote compliance in the wildlife trade community and efforts to educate consumers about their role in stopping illegal wildlife trade.

The Service regulates virtually all wildlife trade in this country. Our wildlife inspectors deal directly on a daily basis with businesses and other entities that legally import wildlife and wildlife products. As such, we are uniquely positioned to work with wildlife importers and exporters to ensure that they comply with U.S. requirements for legal trade – requirements that range from declaring shipments to obtaining the appropriate permits under CITES. Much of our compliance outreach targets this wildlife trade community – a community that includes custom brokers; companies dealing directly in wildlife and wildlife products; and businesses with other links to wildlife trade (such as international hunting guides and outfitters, and internet sale venues).

Compliance outreach includes presentations and training programs for brokers associations and industry groups. We publish public bulletins to alert the wildlife trade community about changes in regulations or requirements. We have participated as exhibitors or speakers at annual meetings, conventions and other forums sponsored by such groups as the Marine Aquarium Societies of North America, the National

Association for the Specialty Food Trade, the Association of Chinese Herbalists, the American Watch Association, the American Ornithologists Union, and Safari Club International. Other recent venues for compliance outreach have included meetings of the Animal Transport Association and the Independent Pet and Animal Transportation Association International and events such as the Baltimore-Washington International Air Cargo Expo in Baltimore and the International Air Cargo Convention in Houston.

Our one-on-one compliance outreach efforts have included consultation with eBay to assist them in establishing appropriate guidelines for online wildlife transactions and with staff from major U.S. department store chains to help them meet requirements for importing fashion goods made from wildlife. We have teamed with nonprofit groups to develop a conservation curriculum for traditional medicine schools in the United States, and have participated in industry-sponsored symposiums addressing the use of protected wildlife and plants in traditional Chinese medicine. Our staff at the Memphis and Louisville hubs of Federal Express and United Parcel Service have worked directly with those companies to improve compliance with import/export requirements.

Our focus on compliance outreach that targets those engaged in wildlife trade on an ongoing basis is critical to our efforts to stem wildlife trafficking on the supply side. We have, however, also long recognized the importance of educating the public in general to reduce demand for illegal wildlife. In fact, the Service has been involved in public outreach in this arena for over 30 years. Our archives include airline magazine notices from the 1970s urging travelers to “check the import regulations before you go” and public service announcements from the 1980s promoting “Smart Shopping” with respect to wildlife and wildlife products.

Such advice remains a staple component of our consumer outreach program. The latest edition of our “Buyer Beware” brochure, co-produced with World Wildlife Fund/TRAFFIC North America, spotlights caviar, wildlife wools, and exotic plants in addition to such long-banned items as sea turtle and spotted cat products. A special “Caribbean” edition, produced in both English and Spanish, focuses on regional trade issues, warning travelers about purchasing products made from sea turtle, coral, queen conch, and other Caribbean species.

“Buyer Beware” information and more detailed guidance is also available on the Internet. The Service’s home page includes an “Import/Export” portal for those seeking information on this subject. The public can access this information as well as information specifically for travelers from the Service’s law enforcement program’s website. The latter includes tips for travelers in English and seven other languages, as well as fact sheets and links to other useful websites.

The Service has large-scale permanent or temporary exhibits warning travelers about contributing to illegal wildlife trade at five major airports (Anchorage, Atlanta, Denver, Detroit, and Minneapolis). Many border crossings in Texas feature displays on wildlife trafficking issues. In recent years, we worked with the staff of the new Atlanta Aquarium to develop a wildlife trade exhibit and hands-on learning center at that facility and helped

the Memphis Zoo assemble a permanent display on the threat of illegal trade to wildlife conservation.

A few years ago, we teamed with a number of nonprofit groups to update our “Suitcase for Survival” program, which utilizes seized wildlife items and a formal curriculum package to teach the public about the conservation threats related to illegal wildlife trade. Last year alone, our National Wildlife Property Repository, which maintains wildlife parts and products forfeited to the Service, provided over 3,000 items to schools, zoos, and other organizations seeking materials for use in conservation education. Our officers occasionally provide presentations on illegal wildlife trade to local area school and community groups. We also conduct broad-based public outreach by staffing exhibits at venues that range from state fairs and sportsmen’s shows to Earth Day celebrations.

We routinely work to educate the public through the media by teaming with U.S. Attorney’s offices to issue news releases spotlighting the prosecution results of specific wildlife smuggling investigations. We work with print and TV journalists, writers, and TV producers to explore the issue of wildlife trade through such vehicles as news and feature articles, books, nightly news segments, and documentary programming – all of which help educate consumers about wildlife trafficking.

As a member of the State Department-led Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking, we recently supported production of a series of Public Service Announcements featuring actor Harrison Ford. Our officers have also participated in media events with the State Department’s Special Envoy Bo Derek, including a media tour of our inspection operation at Miami International Airport and a co-appearance on a morning news show in New York.

Such outreach clearly has a place in the effort to protect global species from illegal trafficking. We would, however, caution against seeing public education as a panacea to the problem of illegal wildlife trade. As we have noted, government engagement in such efforts dates back to the 1970s. Non-profit conservation groups have also invested considerable time, energy and money to educate the public on this issue. And, as any law enforcement officer working in any arena can testify, knowledge of the law does not in itself constitute compliance with the law.

Efforts to address illegal wildlife trade must focus on strong and effective enforcement in “market” countries like the United States. On a global basis, such efforts must also include improved enforcement in “supply” nations and the development of viable economic alternatives to wildlife trafficking in countries where local communities have few options. In short, strategies for combating illegal wildlife trade must consider the complexity of the problem and the need to address it on multiple fronts.

## **Conclusion**

The Service is committed to conserving wildlife not only in this country, but throughout the world. We appreciate the Subcommittee’s interest in consumer awareness and

education about illegal wildlife trade and appreciate the opportunity to participate in this hearing.

Madam Chairwoman, this concludes my prepared remarks. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you may have.