

Committee on Resources,

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

TESTIMONY
OF
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On behalf of the
AMERICAN ZOO AND AQUARIUM ASSOCIATION
before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE
AND OCEANS
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
on
H.R. 643
AFRICAN ELEPHANT CONSERVATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT
H.R. 645
RHINOCEROS AND TIGER CONSERVATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT
and
H.R. 700
ASIAN ELEPHANT CONSERVATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT
March 15, 2001

Thank you Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify this morning on three very important legislative reauthorizations: HR 643, the African Elephant Conservation Act; HR 645, the Rhino-Tiger Conservation Act; and HR 700, the Asian Elephant Conservation Act.

My name is Jim Rapp and I am the Director of the Salisbury Zoological Park in Salisbury, Maryland. I have worked for the Zoo for ten years serving in a number of capacities. The Salisbury Zoo is a twelve-acre facility that displays over 100 different wildlife species - over 350 specimens. We host an annual attendance of 250,000 visitors, including 15,000 local school children.

The Zoological Park has been an accredited member of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) since 1972. I currently serve on the AZA Government Affairs Committee.

AZA represents 191 professionally managed and accredited institutions which draw over 130 million visitors annually and have more than 5 million zoo and aquarium members. Collectively, our institutions teach more than 12 million people each year in living classrooms and dedicate over \$50 million annually to conservation education programs that focus on, among other things, the devastating effects of the loss of vital species habitat and the illegal trade in endangered species parts and products. AZA members invest

over \$50 million annually in scientific research and support over 700 field conservation and research projects in 80 countries.

In addition, AZA institutions have established the Species Survival Plan (SSP) program--a long-term plan involving genetically diverse breeding, habitat preservation, public education, field conservation and supportive research to ensure survival for many threatened and endangered species. Currently, AZA members are involved in 95 SSP programs featuring 124 species throughout the world. A large majority of those SSPs cover species which are listed under the Endangered Species Act or CITES, including all the great apes--chimpanzees, gorillas, orangutans and bonobos, African and Asian elephants, Siberian and Sumatran tigers and black, white, Sumatran and greater one-horned rhinos.

And while AZA zoos and aquariums have become the last stronghold for some species, we fully realize that we cannot save them by zoo propagation alone. AZA members continue to work with Congress, the Federal agencies, conservation organizations, the private sector and the countries of origin to conserve our wildlife heritage. It is in this context that AZA expresses its strong support for the quick passage of HR 643, HR 645 and HR 700.

Before I briefly discuss these bills, I would first like to commend the members of this Subcommittee for their far-sighted vision in passing HR. 4320, the Great Ape Conservation Act during the last Congress and creating a very critical addition to the Multinational Species Conservation Fund program.

OVERVIEW

Mr. Chairman, we have before us today, three important pieces of legislation that represent a significant portion of the federal government's direct contribution to preserving species-specific wildlife abroad. Twenty percent or more of the world's biodiversity could disappear in the next two decades, primarily due to habitat fragmentation and alteration and the over-exploitation of threatened and endangered species according to recent estimates. It is therefore vital that more people, governments, institutions and organizations become involved in efforts to conserve our imperiled environment.

Over the duration of the African Elephant, Asian Elephant and Rhino/Tiger funds, the U.S. Congress has appropriated over \$14 million that has been leveraged with nearly \$56 million in real dollars and/or in-kind services from host countries and local/international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This is a significant partnership--especially in terms of government programs. The funds provided by Congress have served as the catalyst for the implementation of over 230 projects worldwide ranging from highly sophisticated and innovative data collection, tracking and monitoring programs to simply providing essential on-the-ground resources--weapons, ammunition, vehicles and communication systems--to game wardens and law enforcement officials who have been entrusted to protect these magnificent animals from the ravages of civil unrest, poaching and habitat exploitation.

What makes these programs effective is that the US Fish and Wildlife Service distributes the funds in a timely and efficient manner with very few bureaucratic entanglements. The funds are targeted to high-priority field conservation efforts that most directly benefit the species of concern. More importantly, the African Elephant, Asian Elephant and Rhino/Tiger funds have long-recognized the value of promoting cooperative projects among government entities, NGOs and the affected local communities in the range states. This is essential because it is only through local action, local education, and local support that realistic solutions for saving these species can be effectively devised and implemented.

Let me turn now to the three reauthorizations:

1) H.R. 643, the African Elephant Conservation Reauthorization Act

The African elephant is the standard bearer for the conservation fund programs. At the time of the enactment of the African Elephant Conservation Act in 1989, the population of this magnificent species was declining at a perilous rate due to ivory poaching, habitat destruction and elephant-human conflicts. The Act has gone a long ways toward stemming the dramatic decline in African elephant numbers, with wild population estimates now ranging from 300,000 to 600,000 individuals. While this may seem to be a stable size, it represents less than half of the elephants that inhabited Africa in the 1970s. The species is still not out of danger as increased pressures from the ivory trade, ongoing civil wars and the evolving bushmeat crisis in Central and East Africa continue to threaten populations. In addition, only about 20% of the more than 2.2 million square mile range of the African elephant is under some form of protection.

Since the late 1980s, the African Elephant Conservation Fund has generated 123 projects in 22 range countries. These projects have provided critical assistance to range countries and NGOs for anti-poaching/anti-smuggling law enforcement efforts, population surveillance and monitoring, habitat protection and management, conservation education, cross-border cooperation and elephant-human conflict resolution.

2) H.R. 645, the Rhinoceros/Tiger Conservation Reauthorization Act

As this Subcommittee is well aware, the situation facing all species of tigers and rhinos in the wild has reached crisis levels. Since the 1940s, three tiger subspecies--the Caspian, Bali, and Javan--have become extinct, and the South China tiger is now among the most endangered mammals on earth. Ninety-five percent of the world's tiger population has disappeared since the early 1900s. At that time, an estimated 100,000 tigers roamed India, Indochina and other parts of Asia. Today, approximately 7000 tigers are left in the wild and those numbers continue to drop. The estimated wild populations of the five subspecies of tiger in the wild are as follows: South China tiger 20-30 individuals; Amur/Siberian tiger: 360-400 individuals; Bengal tiger: 3200-4500 individuals; Indo-Chinese tiger: 1200-1800 individuals; and Sumatran tiger: 400-500 individuals. While pressure from an expanding human population and the development of natural resources to support a burgeoning Asian economy have contributed to the decline in tiger populations, poaching and the use of tiger parts in traditional Asian medicines have clearly taken center stage since the 1980s as the primary reasons for this species' decline.

The situation facing the three Asian and two African rhino species is also extremely serious. Populations were abundant and rather widely distributed in Asia through the mid-1800s. Today fewer than 100 Javan rhinos, 300 Sumatran rhinos and 2400 Indian rhinos remain in the wild. In Africa, wild populations of black rhinos have declined by over 95 percent (to approximately 2700 individuals) over the past two decades while over 10,400 white rhinos still remain. The precipitous decline in the black rhino numbers can be directly attributed to poaching for the trade in traditional medicines and ornamental dagger handles. Obviously these population numbers are not sustainable. Conservation biologists contend that a population size of 2000-3000 individuals within each species is necessary for long-term viability. Most rhino species are near or well below this level. While poaching for the horn is the major threat for all five species, habitat degradation is also a significant threat for the Asian species due to unsustainable exploitation of timberlands, unchecked conversion of land to agricultural use and human over-population.

The Rhino/Tiger Conservation Fund created in 1994 has generated 116 projects in 16 countries. The fund has proven itself effective for critical conservation programs in Africa and Asia for the highly endangered

species and subspecies of rhinoceros and tiger. The fund has delivered immediate results by assisting range countries and conservation NGOs on the front lines through critical field conservation work, *in situ* breeding programs, monitoring and surveillance, habitat management, and anti-poaching/anti-smuggling efforts. Conservation education programs designed to address animal-human conflicts, consumer awareness of rhino/tiger products and the intrinsic value of these species to local communities have also been effective.

3) H.R. 700, the Asian Elephant Conservation Reauthorization Act

The number of Asian elephants in the wild varies between 35,000 and 50,000 individuals in over 13 countries. With a population that is 1/10th the size of their African relatives, Asian elephants can ill-afford a prolonged decline in their numbers. Yet, with the tremendous increase in the human population of Asia and the resulting increase in elephant-human conflicts due to shrinking critical habitat, the prognosis for the Asian elephant is guarded at best.

The Asian Elephant Conservation Fund created in 1997 has generated 27 projects in nine range countries. Like its African elephant counterpart, these projects have primarily focused on habitat and protected area management, surveillance and monitoring of populations, cross-border cooperation, conservation education in the local communities and the resolution of elephant-human conflicts.

Mr. Chairman, the endangered status of the wildlife species highlighted by these three conservation funds represents an ecological and societal problem of enormous proportions. It is a problem of political unrest compounded by unregulated resource exploitation and habitat degradation through logging, mining, farming and poaching. It is also a problem that is not specifically limited to the species we have discussed today. In Borneo, for example, the orangutan population has declined by 90%. Then there are also lesser-known species such as the Rodrigues Island fruit bat--a highly endangered species that is essential for seed dispersal and pollination on the Rodrigues Island in the Indian Ocean.

We are now facing what is popularly referred to as the "Empty Forest Syndrome," where the trees in the forest may be left standing but the endemic wildlife is long removed. And if the essential wildlife--the predators, the prey, the seed spreaders, the natural fertilizers--are gone, the question of ecological balance becomes paramount.

During the last Congress, AZA and many of the NGOs beside me today testified on a bill entitled the Keystone Species Conservation Act, a measure that is no less critical or time-sensitive than the reauthorizations before us today. In the United States, our cornerstone piece of wildlife conservation is the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973. Under the ESA, over 1,050 animal species worldwide have been designated as either threatened or endangered--555 of those are foreign species. However, foreign species do not receive the key protection mechanisms inherent in the ESA such as critical habitat designation or species recovery plans.

Similarly, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), lists over 30,000 species that receive protection through restrictions on trade in parts and products. However, CITES is not designed to offer *in situ* conservation measures for threatened and endangered species.

The Keystone Species bill would have created a conservation fund account that built upon the strengths of the existing elephant and rhino/tiger funds. Funding would be prioritized based on 1) projects that would enhance programs for the conservation of species that are most imperiled and that are supported by the relevant wildlife management authority in the country where the program will be conducted; 2) projects that

would receive the greatest level of matching assistance from non-Federal sources; and 3) projects that would enhance local capacity for the conservation of the species. The bill had some shortcomings but there was substantial interest and support for an indicator-species, ecosystem-wide approach to wildlife conservation. In addition, the establishment of this type of legislation would obviate the need to return in two or four years to fight for other species-specific bills.

In conclusion, the challenges before this Subcommittee with regard to international wildlife conservation are three-fold: 1) to reauthorize these three highly-effective conservation funds; 2) to work to secure increased appropriations levels for all of the funds under the Multi-National Species Conservation Fund program, which includes African elephants, Asian elephants, Rhino/tiger, Great Apes, and neotropical migratory birds; and 3) to look beyond these established funds to new and innovative legislative mechanisms for addressing ecosystem-wide management and protection issues.

Again Mr. Chairman, AZA wholeheartedly supports HR 642, HR 645 and HR 700 and we look forward to working with you and the Subcommittee to secure swift passage of these bills this year. In addition, AZA member institutions will continue to raise the awareness of our 130 million visitors each year to bring focus on threatened and endangered species worldwide for it is public awareness of their plight that has helped engage the U.S. as a major catalyst for world concern.

Thank you again for this opportunity to comment on these important wildlife conservation measures.

I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

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