

Testimony

of

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before the

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Committee on Resources
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regarding the

Growing Problem of Bushmeat Consumption

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you very much for the opportunity to comment on the growing problem of bushmeat consumption . I am here today to represent the views of the Wildlife Conservation Society, founded in 1895 as the New York Zoological Society, a 107-year old US-based membership organization. The Wildlife Conservation Society conserves wildlife and wild lands throughout the world, as well as managing animal collections at the Bronx Zoo and other “Living Institutions” in the New York area.

Fifteen years ago, our researchers and conservationists in the field began to describe a mounting wave of hunting that was affecting wildlife living in the forests and grasslands around the world. Since humans evolved we have hunted and eaten wildlife. Today it is only the poorest families that rely on meat from wild species as an important source of protein. This is true even in the United States where families in poor rural districts still hunt for the freezer. When hunting becomes commercial to satisfy demand from urban populations, it quickly becomes unsustainable, as we found in this country at the turn of the last century. Now it is the tropical regions that face a bushmeat crisis. The wave first passed through Asia, extirpating wildlife in the forests of South-east Asia and Indochina. It is now cresting in Africa, and we anticipate that hunting at a similar scale will swell in Latin America within the next five to ten years. The present magnitude of the problem in Africa has captured all of our attention, and our testimony will focus on this part of the world, but recognize that it is a global phenomenon. The phenomenon has been called the “bushmeat” or “wild meat crisis” because the hunting is being driven by a demand for wild meat for human consumption.

The Wildlife Conservation Society would like to thank the Subcommittee, and especially Chairman Gilchrest, for recognizing the importance of this issue. Unrestrained wildlife harvest threatens the survival of many wildlife species, especially those living in the tropical forests of the world. Hunting is especially pernicious for those large-bodied, slow breeding species of special conservation concern such as the great apes, large carnivores, and elephants – all species recognized by the U.S. Congress as needing special attention. The local extinction and loss of wild species has cascading effects on the functionality and integrity of forests as a whole, and endangers efforts to both protect and manage those forests in a sustainable fashion. And the loss of wildlife resources threatens people’s health and well-being and affects their cultural integrity.

The recent explosion of hunting in Africa, like the situation in South-east Asia and Indochina twenty years ago, has been stimulated by the opening up of previously inaccessible regions. Road construction often associated with logging and petroleum development has created a network of roads that reach into the most remote areas. This network allows commercial hunters entry into the forest, and provides hunters with access to urban markets. Moreover, much of forested Africa has experienced in recent years the additional challenge of civil unrest and conflict. The resulting breakdown of national and local authority has left a governance void in many places and precluded most attempts to manage and control the hunting. It has been open season on all wild species.

The scale of hunting in forested Africa is vast. In central Africa alone, consumption of meat from wild animals is estimated at between one and five million metric tons a year. If we take the most conservative figure of one million metric tons, this is equivalent to 9 billion quarter-pound hamburgers of wild meat a year – enough to give even McDonalds pause. Who eats all those hamburger-equivalents? There are 33 million people living in Central Africa, and, on average, every man, woman and child eats the equivalent of on bushmeat “hamburger” each and every day of the year. Central Africa families eat as much meat as do many families in Europe and the United States, with one difference – most of the meat eaten in rural Central Africa comes from wildlife.

This level of harvest is not sustainable. We estimate that today’s harvest rate in Central African forest is at least five times what could be produced sustainably under even optimal conditions. The consequence of this overexploitation is that wildlife is being strip-mined out of tropical forests, resulting in what has been called the “Empty Forest” – a forest without wildlife, unnaturally quiet. Across Central Africa, we are estimating

that, except in adequately protected or inaccessible areas, ungulate populations have been already reduced by 50%, primate populations perhaps as much as 90%. Elephants, so long pursued for their ivory, are now also hunted for their meat. Hunters rarely target particular wildlife species because they are simply hunting for meat. So almost all animals from mammals, to birds, to reptiles are affected by hunting. Constant heavy hunting is destroying local populations of the most vulnerable species, especially those that large-bodied and breed slowly: gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos, many monkey species, the large carnivores, and elephants. As species are extirpated from one area, hunters move into new areas.

The loss of wildlife species has wider implications on the forests themselves. The species preferred by hunters generally are large-bodied, typically fruit eaters and herbivorous browsers. These species frequently play keystone roles in forest ecology as pollinators, seed dispersers, and seed predators, as well as comprising the majority of the vertebrate biomass. Their reduction or extirpation produces cascading effects through the biological community, causing other species to disappear, and the ability of the forest to recover from disturbance to diminish.

In addition to the forest and the species themselves, it is the rural poor who suffer the most from the loss of wildlife species. The commercial trade in bushmeat provides only a transitory benefit and a long-term cost to these people. It is the millions of people at the margins of the cash economy, who are at the ecological frontier, and whose lives are intertwined with the wildlife, plants and wider functioning of the forest. It is they who experience drops in daily protein consumption as forests are opened up to outsiders. It is the people identified as the focus on the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), launched at last month's G8 meeting, who live on less than US\$1 per day. They lack the education, skills and cultural context to take advantage of cash-earning jobs from plantations and industry, and as their wildlife resources disappear, their backs are against the wall. Lacking capital and access to markets, they cannot switch to alternative sources of animal protein.

Addressing the bushmeat problem is difficult. How to impose regulation on a human activity too variable and dispersed to be considered a true industry? How to draw the line between subsistence hunting by local people and commercial exploitation by outsiders, when there are so many examples that fall between the two extremes? How do we tackle a problem that is but an indirect effect of national expansion into the frontier? In our programs we have found some approaches that offer a way forward.

First and foremost, establishing refuges for wildlife populations is essential. A network of well-managed protected areas will both support more diverse and abundant populations of wildlife and provide "reservoirs" for wildlife that are being hunted elsewhere. Establishment of such reserves is thus crucial to steward the resources essential to the nutritional, social and cultural well-being of the rural poor living in forest environments. The Wildlife Conservation Society, and our collaborators WWF and CI, are active in establishing and managing parks throughout the Congo Basin. Proposed and existing parks in the five countries of the Basin might cover some 30 million acres. The key to better management of protected areas is expanding and strengthening staff capacity to regulate access to and use of protected forest resources.

Second, the commercial trade in bushmeat needs to be regulated and phased out as quickly as possible. Many tropical countries lack the government institutions needed to accomplish this. Often the only effective institutions to be found in remote forest areas are the timber companies themselves. The Wildlife Conservation Society, for instance, has been working with a private timber company, Congolaise Industrielle des Bois (CIB), and the Ministry of Forestry Economy in northern Congo since 1998 to reduce hunting and transport of bushmeat in 4.5 million acres of its concession. The effort is a four-pronged one of

education, enforcement, provision of alternative sources of animal protein, and monitoring. So it involves the local communities in managing and protecting wildlife populations, and monitors markets in logging camps and villages. It has established an “ecoguard” brigade to close down the commercial trade through the control of vehicle traffic on logging roads, and by preventing wild meat being carried out of the area on flights down to the cities.

Third, ways to provide alternative sources of animal protein to rural communities and to workers in companies exploiting natural resources must be developed. The Wildlife Conservation Society, for instance, is working with the CIB logging company to establish other economically-feasible sources of animal protein for people living within their concessions.

The US has several immediate opportunities to help stem the tide of bushmeat hunting: making nonconcessional debt eligible under the Tropical Forest Management Act; encouraging USAID programs and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) efforts that focus on the development of alternative protein sources and livelihoods; and playing a leadership role in establishing an African forest certification program for logging companies that practice wildlife management and help prevent bushmeat hunting and trade. In addition, the G8 Africa Action Plan in support of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) identifies a general strategy for Africa that is highly relevant to the bushmeat problem. NEPAD calls for:

- Resource mobilization. In the context of the bushmeat problem, there is a need to establish funding mechanisms to support the establishment and sound management of protected areas. Even in the United States, the National Park Service is not economically self-sufficient. Economic incentives are also needed to encourage the timber industry to manage forest resources more sustainably including forest wildlife. Further funds are needed to develop alternative animal protein sources for the rural poor living in the forest frontier.
- Peace and security. This almost goes without saying. The protection of wild areas and the sustainable use of natural resources requires good governance and appropriate management. And this requires political, social and economic stability.
- Governance. In this context there is a need to ensure that national governments have the capacity to engage with the natural resource extraction companies in ways that are transparent and promote long-term, sustainable management of all forest resources. In addition, the responsibility for many management decisions still remain with local governments, and it is important that their authority derives from well-informed, transparent, democratic processes.
- Human resources. To ensure that the capacity to manage Central Africa’s wild forests develops to address the threats from unsustainable hunting, we must reinforce and scale up ongoing training mechanisms and launch new avenues for learning – and in so doing help educate the next generation of conservation leaders. We need to ensure that the region’s resource management agencies have the capacity to protect and manage the region’s natural resources.

We would therefore urge the Subcommittee to:

- Recognize the enormity of the bushmeat crisis, both for wild species and the ecosystems where they occur, and for the rural poor who have traditionally depended and will need to depend on wildlife resources and forest biodiversity in the future. Recognize that the bushmeat crisis is not just driving some species to extinction, it is not just about threats to the Great Apes and elephants, it is about the destruction of the very fabric of tropical forests and the lives of the people who are supported by those

forests.

- Understand that consumption of bushmeat also has severe public health implications. Handling and eating wildlife, especially apes and other primates, increases the risk that people will contract deadly hemorrhagic diseases such as Ebola, and has facilitated the emergence of new diseases like HIV/AIDS.
- Support Administration efforts to establish partnerships with African countries and provide the support through the NEPAD process and the other identified opportunities for the establishment of protected areas, efforts to curtail the commercial bushmeat trade, and ways to provide alternative sources of animal protein for the rural poor of Africa.
- Encourage Congress to increase funding for the Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE), the Multinational Species Conservation Fund and the Global Environment Facility (GEF). To varying degrees, these underfunded programs support critical conservation activities including protected areas establishment and management, anti-poaching enforcement, local and institutional capacity building, and monitoring.

I thank you again for the opportunity to comment on these issues. I would be happy to answer any questions.