

TESTIMONY

OF

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SOUTH CAROLINA AQUARIUM
CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA**

before the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON INSULAR AFFAIRS, OCEANS AND WILDLIFE

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

On

HR 509, MARINE TURTLE CONSERVATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT

**H.R. 1454, MULTINATIONAL SPECIES CONSERVATION FUNDS
SEMIPOSTAL STAMP ACT**

HR 556, SOUTHERN SEA OTTER RECOVERY AND RESEARCH ACT

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Thank you Madame Chair and Representative Brown for the opportunity to testify in strong support for three very important pieces of conservation legislation, HR 509—the Marine Turtle Conservation Reauthorization Act; HR 1454—the Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Act; and HR 556—the Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act.

My name is Whit McMillan and I am the Director of Education for the South Carolina Aquarium in Charleston, South Carolina. The South Carolina Aquarium is a not for profit (501C3) aquarium opened in May of 2000 in Charleston, SC showcasing the many and varied ecosystems found in our region. The Aquarium is devoted to education and conservation, serving some 500,000 visitors each year. The Aquarium is recognized for its conservation efforts with diverse species such as freshwater mussels; a highly endangered fish, the robust redhorse and is internationally recognized for its care and rehabilitation of marine turtles. The South Carolina Aquarium is also known for its science education programs which have been provided free of charge to more than 90,000 South Carolina students. The Aquarium is also an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums—AZA.

AZA and its member institutions are proud to work with Congress, the Federal agencies, conservation organizations, the private sector and the general public to conserve our wildlife heritage. With 175 million visitors to 218 accredited zoos and aquariums, AZA's focus on connecting people and animals provides a critical link to helping animals in their native habitats. Far-reaching conservation programs at AZA institutions have provided support over 3,700 field conservation and research projects in more than 100 countries. AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums are among the leaders in the protection of endangered species. Over 20 years ago, AZA 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 110 SSP programs that include more than 160 species—many of which are the subject of today's hearing.

As centers for conservation volunteerism, AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums offer the public a great way to discover connections to their environment and to learn how they can make a difference in conservation. Annually, more than 58,000 volunteers invest over 3,000,000 hours of their time supporting virtually every aspect of zoo and aquarium operations. AZA-accredited institutions also teach more than 12 million people each year in living classrooms, and have provided training to more than 400,000 teachers.

Let me briefly discuss each of these important pieces of legislation before us today.

HR 509, MARINE TURTLE CONSERVATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT

The internationally-recognized Sea Turtle Working Group—which operates in conjunction with AZA—is composed of more than 100 individual members and 27 professionally-managed institutions that care for sea turtles. These individuals and organizations provide professional husbandry and medical care for sea turtles in aquariums, and promote the conservation of sea turtle species through education and support of field projects. It is in this context that AZA and the South Carolina Aquarium express strong support for the vision and purposes of HR 509.

The South Carolina Aquarium is home to the only sea turtle rehabilitation center for the state of South Carolina, with all stranded and injured sea turtles found on the state's beaches and waters coming to the Aquarium for care and eventual release into the wild. Currently, the Aquarium has 8 sea turtles in residence and under medical care and has returned 37 marine turtles to the wild. The South Carolina Aquarium Sea Turtle Rescue program also plays a major role in education with local high schools visiting the hospital to learn about the care these animals receive, ways that they become involved and possible career opportunities in science and animal husbandry. These students represent the future leaders in conservation but action is needed now to insure the future of all sea turtle species.

According to the IUCN/Species Survival Commission's Marine Turtle Specialist Group, the conservation status of marine turtles is dire. Loggerhead, green, olive ridley and leatherback turtles have all been classified as endangered while hawksbill and Kemp's ridley turtles are classified as critical. The last 100 years have been devastating to most sea turtle populations and the current plight of these ancient mariners is almost totally a result of human activities. The list of human threats to sea turtles is a long one which includes: bycatch from longline and gillnet fisheries, discarded or unattended fishing gear, pollution, unregulated take of turtle shells/meat/eggs for trade and subsistence, turtle strikes by ships and propellers, and habitat loss in nesting areas. The loss of coastal nesting beaches to development and exploitation, and incidental captures by fishing gear in the open ocean are certainly the most critical. There are also natural threats to these fragile populations from disease and predation.

Sea turtle species migrate throughout the world to feed and reproduce, often swimming great distances. Conservation efforts in all areas visited by sea turtles are necessary to help preserve their populations. AZA members have been involved with sea turtle conservation projects in many locations in the U.S. and abroad including Mexico, the Caribbean, Costa Rica and Venezuela. Current projects such as the protection of Kemp's ridley turtles at their Rancho Nuevo nesting beach on the Gulf coast of Mexico have been successful in increasing the numbers of the world's rarest sea turtle. I would like to submit for the record the June 2008 testimony of Dr. Pat Burchfield of the Gladys Porter Zoo before this Subcommittee which highlights the recent successes of Kemp's ridley conservation. Continued funding for this international effort is critical for the eventual recovery of the endangered Kemp's ridley population.

This is but one example where international cooperation and financial support are crucial to the survival and recovery of sea turtles. There are similar conservation needs that must be addressed and the reauthorization of the Marine Turtle Conservation Fund under the rubric of the Multinational Species Conservation Fund will provide an effective vehicle in which to meet these needs.

Additional funding focusing on the biology of sea turtles would also be useful, especially in the areas of:

- 1) studies of genetic variation – recent work suggests that there are specific loci that distinguish turtles hatched on various beaches around the world but more work is needed to confirm this. This would help us understand if turtles really do come back to the same beach each year as well as whether they come back to the beach where they were hatched.
- 2) Basic biology – 99.9% of a turtles life is spent in the ocean but we know so very little about what they actually do in the ocean. Most research efforts are focused on nesting beaches. With the new technology available (GIS, telemetry, cameras, genetics, etc) we will have a better idea of where females turtles spend their time once they leave the beach until they come back to nest. As for the males, we know even less.
- 3) Disease – Fibropapilloma virus is taking a toll on sea turtle populations and there are pockets of areas that are full of fibropap turtles. Can they infect non-fibropap turtles? Are there areas free of fibropap? Understanding the spread of this disease and how it affects turtles will be essential for the future of some marine turtle species.

AZA believes that HR 509 represents a critical step in addressing the plight of marine turtles. The bill reauthorizes a conservation fund similar to the successful African elephant, Asian elephant, great ape and rhino/tiger conservation funds under the general Multinational Species Conservation Fund account. These funds represent a significant portion of the federal government's direct contribution to preserving wildlife species abroad. For example, over the duration of the African elephant, Asian elephant, great ape, marine turtle and rhino/tiger conservation funds, the U.S. Congress has appropriated tens of millions of dollars that have been leveraged more than three-fold 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 hundreds of projects worldwide ranging from highly sophisticated and innovative data collection, tracking, research 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.

There is one amendment to this bill however which we would request the Subcommittee entertain: a provision that up to 20 percent of the annual appropriation for the Marine Turtle Fund in excess of \$1 million may be used for grants to assist the conservation of

other species within the Order Testudines. This provision would give the US Fish and Wildlife Service sufficient flexibility in addressing the conservation needs of freshwater turtles and tortoises in foreign countries.

H.R. 1454, MULTINATIONAL SPECIES CONSERVATION FUNDS SEMIPOSTAL STAMP ACT

Like other AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, the South Carolina Aquarium is involved with other conservation programs around the world. Habitat fragmentation and alteration, climate change and the over-exploitation of threatened and endangered species around the world necessitates that more citizens, governments, institutions and organizations become involved in efforts to conserve our imperiled environment.

What makes programs like the Multinational Species Conservation Fund 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 or region of most concern. More importantly, these programs 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 and critical habitats can be effectively devised and implemented.

While we have seen some incremental growth in the dollars appropriated by Congress for these critical international conservation programs--thanks in large part to the support of this Committee and Subcommittee and the actions of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee--the overall international conservation account is not growing fast enough to address significant wildlife and habitat threats. Therefore, we need additional creative funding streams like those developed under HR 1454, the Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Act, to help meet these critical needs.

In August 2001, a diverse coalition of leading conservation organizations—including AZA, circuses, sportsmen, and animal protection groups worked together to create the Vanishing Wildlife semipostal stamp proposal to benefit international wildlife conservation efforts that were administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The proposal was in response to a competitive program established by P.L.106-253, the Semipostal Authorization Act of 2000, to determine the successor to the highly successful Breast Cancer Research Stamp. The tragic events of September 11, 2001 rightfully terminated this competition and gave rise to the continuation of the Breast Cancer Research Stamp and the introduction of the Heroes of 9/11 Stamp.

We now have before us HR 1454, a bill to provide for the design, issuance and sale of a semipostal stamp to raise public awareness and critically needed funds for the species listed under the Multinational Species Conservation Fund—African and Asian elephants, rhinos, tigers, great apes, and marine turtles. The bill is modeled after the current semipostals which have been highly successful. For example, the United States Postal

Service (USPS) has sold over 800 million breast cancer research stamps since 1998 and has raised over \$59 million for vital research in the process.

Under HR 1454, the USPS would issue a semipostal stamp to be sold to the public at a premium price for the purpose of generating greater revenue in support of the Multinational Species Conservation Fund program. This is a fiscally responsible bill that would boost funding for international wildlife conservation. Any costs associated with the issuance of the stamp would be recouped by the USPS through sales with no cost to the U.S. taxpayer.

The species covered under this semipostal proposal are immensely popular with the American public, and many of them have been adopted by corporations, sports teams, universities, and others as symbols of strength and prowess. There are 175 million visitors to zoos and aquariums in the United States every year, most of them wanting to view and enjoy tigers, rhinos, elephants, marine turtles and great apes. These animals have broad national appeal to a diverse population of animal enthusiasts—young and old alike.

HR 1454 is supported by a wide and unique coalition of interests. The breadth and depth of this coalition would ensure broad-based promotion from organizations across the country, and the size of our respective memberships and visitor bases guarantees strong support for the stamp. The Multinational Species Conservation Fund Stamp would provide a vehicle for the public to voluntarily contribute additional resources for international conservation programs, and make a major difference toward the achievement of Federal agency wildlife conservation goals.

The U.S. Postal Service has its own benchmark for national appeal in its frequent issues of wildlife commemorative stamps. Wildlife stamps have been among the best sellers of all time, both in terms of print runs and of retention rates by collectors. The 1982 State Birds and Flowers stamps and the 1987 North American Wildlife stamps had print runs of 667 million and 646 million respectively, compared to 517 million for the most popular of all stamps, the Elvis Presley stamp of 1993. An average print run at the time was 150 million stamps. The Breast Cancer Research stamp had a print run of 280 million for its first two years, and sold 223 million stamps. We would expect that a Multinational Species Conservation Fund Semipostal Stamp featuring elephants, tigers, rhinos, great apes, and marine turtles, promoted vigorously by the Postal Service and private individuals and organizations, would do very well with a general public interested in wildlife and wildlife habitat issues. In short, history has shown that the public likes to use wildlife stamps on their letters, and will pay a differential above the normal postage rate for a cause that they support.

It should also be noted that the national organizations supporting the Multinational Species conservation Fund stamp proposal are well known and respected for their interest in wildlife conservation, and have extensive membership and visitor bases that can be mobilized to assist in a national promotion campaign. AZA is part of a broad network of private organizations that is capable of a sustained effort to assist the Postal Service in

local, national and international marketing. This coalition has members in every state of the Union, and many of us have international affiliates that can be activated to support foreign purchases of American semipostals, both by collectors and by conservationists, sportsmen and others wanting to donate to the cause of protecting flagship species.

HR 556, SOUTHERN SEA OTTER RECOVERY AND RESEARCH ACT

Finally, AZA supports HR 556, the Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act. The bill requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to carry out a research and recovery program for southern sea otter populations along the California coast. As always, AZA is concerned that the Service is provided sufficient funds and other resources to carry out these mandates in an effective manner.

Related to this, AZA strongly recommends that the Fish and Wildlife Service establish a marine mammal stranding and rehabilitation protocol under the Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue Assistance Grant Program. To date, only the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has requested appropriations for this program. AZA institutions conduct many stranding and rehabilitation efforts with marine mammals that fall under the jurisdiction of the USFWS (polar bear, walrus, dugong, manatee and sea otter). A Fish and Wildlife Service version of the grant program would help defray costs associated with these recovery and rehabilitation efforts and would also allow eligible Marine Mammal Stranding Network participants to use funds to collect scientific data, improve the treatment and operation of rescue and rehabilitation centers and to directly fund the recovery and treatment of individual animals.

Again Madame Chair, AZA wholeheartedly supports HR 509, 1454 and 556 and we look forward to working with you and the Subcommittee to secure swift passage of these bills. In addition, AZA member institutions will continue to raise the awareness of our 175 million visitors each year to bring focus on threatened and endangered species worldwide for it is public awareness and public appreciation 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.