



Testimony of DR. MOHAMED I BAKARR, Senior Technical Director, **Center for Applied Biodiversity Science at Conservation International**, before the House Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans, on the growing problem of bushmeat consumption in Africa

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Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, and colleagues on this panel good morning. I thank you all very much for the opportunity to testify before you on the growing problem of bushmeat consumption in Africa. I am here to represent the views of Conservation International, in my capacity as Senior Technical Director in the Center for Applied Biodiversity Science, which is leading CI's strategy for addressing the bushmeat issue in Africa. CI is a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of biodiversity, focusing specifically on the world's biologically richest and most threatened ecosystems where the risk of extinction is ever so real, as well as on tropical wilderness areas where opportunities for protecting large tracts of natural habitats still remain. With programs in more than 30 countries around the world, CI's work focuses on demonstrating that human societies are able to live harmoniously with nature. Wildlife utilization in general and the bushmeat issue in particular are, therefore, at the very crux of our conservation efforts and actions around the world.

For more than 10 years now, CI has been working with local communities, government agencies, scientists and other conservation professionals to analyze and understand the global implications of wildlife utilization and consumption. From the extensive commercial trade of turtles in Southeast Asia to the subsistence hunting practices of pygmies in Central Africa, it has become clear to us that the issues at stake are indeed very complex. Although bushmeat utilization has been flagged since the early 1960s as a potential long-

term threat to wildlife populations in Africa, it is the same practice that has sustained the livelihoods of many generations of Africans. For the most part, people in Africa still hunt wildlife and consume bushmeat for the same reason their forefathers before them did. Bushmeat hunting has been a tradition and a way of life in Africa for eons, and all animal species (from rodents to great apes) are hunted for consumptive use.

But like for many other facets of life on the continent, the ethics of wildlife exploitation has undergone dramatic changes in recent years. Human populations have grown rapidly on the continent, and more people are now engaged in the exploitation of wildlife than ever before. More importantly, use of low-tech hunting tools such as traps have been replaced by easily accessible guns and rifles that facilitate rapid extirpation of large numbers of animals. With access to more powerful and highly effective weapons, large mammals such as elephants and great apes that were once hunted by only the most experienced and traditionally revered hunters, have become easy prey for the commercially minded hunters. These itinerant commercial hunters are in turn being aided by gradual transformations of the African landscape through the activities of extractive industries (logging and mining), which are opening up previously remote areas and creating transient settlements.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee and fellow panelists, I do not need to reiterate the consequences of these transformations for Africa's wildlife and biodiversity, because the media has done an excellent job bringing it to the global community. Please allow me, however, to just draw one very significant conclusion about the current status-quo. And that is, whereas wildlife is still very much an important resource for human livelihoods in West Africa, bushmeat utilization is no longer sustainable because populations of most of the species involved are being greatly impacted, and some locally extirpated throughout their range. As you can rightly surmise, the bushmeat problem in Africa has emerged as a double-edge – on the one hand, wildlife populations are being extirpated, and on the other, the livelihood of a great majority of people is increasingly at risk from the loss of wildlife. It is this complex challenge we are confronted with for achieving biodiversity conservation on the continent.

As a conservation organization that cares about people and wildlife, Conservation International has been very keen on exploring and implementing conservation solutions that accommodate this concern. We are committed to pursuing an integrated approach that accommodates diverse perspectives and involves multiple stakeholders and partners to maximize success in mitigating the threat. In this regard, we have helped organize regional workshops in West and Central Africa where major stakeholders discuss and analyze the social, cultural, economic and biological contexts, and establish frameworks for developing and implementing solutions. Our involvement in the Bushmeat Crisis Task Force (BCTF) also reflects our commitment toward a broader alliance to tackle this complex and large-scale problem. Through BCTF, CI and other organizations committed to saving biological diversity around the world have been able to reach decision-makers and the general public, with the strongest possible messages that reflect our collective concern on this crucial issue.

More specifically, CI country programs are confronting the problem head on in the field by targeting all major stakeholders at the national level. In Ghana for example, the focus has been on mobilizing the public through a massive awareness and sensitization campaign based on cultural and traditional priorities, such as *totems*. Totems are wildlife entities (animal species) that symbolize cultural values and beliefs. Although success is yet to be translated in terms of actual reductions in bushmeat hunting and threats to wildlife, the effort to link bushmeat problem to totems has garnered the attention of all Ghanaians. To put this into an even better perspective, let me quote a recent message from the Director of CI's Ghana Program, Okyeame Ampadu-Agyei: *"The bushmeat crisis is now receiving national attention. This is mainly due to our sustained awareness campaign based on the conservation of totems in Ghana. The new concept has galvanized the entire citizenry to address the problem by involving politicians, traditional rulers, hunters, market women and the general public. The attached paper presents the novelty approach. It shows how our culture is inextricably linked with animals. This could be the final key to address the bushmeat crisis in many parts of Africa."*

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, the scale of the bushmeat crisis in Africa is enormous. Long-term success therefore requires that solutions such as those emerging in Ghana be scaled-up proportionally to ensure a balance between human livelihood needs and biodiversity conservation goals. Additional approaches are needed to ensure effective protection of species already threatened by the commercial trade. This is in no doubt a daunting task for African countries and conservation organizations, and one that would require major investment by governments and funding agencies. So what role should the U.S. Government play? The leadership of U.S. Government Agencies in supporting bilateral initiatives on biodiversity conservation across Africa has been formidable. The bushmeat crisis cannot be separated from all other conservation challenges on the continent, which means that U.S. Government assistance through the Agency for International Development (USAID), and International Programs of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife and the U.S.D.A. Forest Service has already made crucial contributions in one way or another toward addressing the bushmeat problem. Therefore, I propose here that considerations be given to the following specific strategies for increased funding from the U.S. government, possibly through an especially targeted mechanism:

- *Creation, expansion and effective management of forests parks and protected areas:* The creation, expansion and effective management of forest parks and protected areas that maintain a safe haven for forest animals is the only way of guaranteeing viable populations of many wildlife species on the long-term. It is from these last remaining natural areas that repopulation of depleted landscapes can occur, to give future generations of Africans a chance at sustaining traditional livelihood practices.
- *Promotion of alternative sources of protein:* As long as people depend on wildlife as a source of protein, bushmeat hunting will remain a major factor in sustaining rural livelihoods. But the commercial trade can be greatly reduced by promoting stable, competitively priced supplies of animal protein other than bushmeat, particularly in urban areas across the region, where bushmeat is more of a luxury food item.
- *Monitoring and influencing activities of extractive industries:* By working closely with extractive industries such as logging and mining, government agencies and conservation organizations can ensure that activities associated with resource extraction (i.e. the creation of roads etc.) do not lead to the

widespread slaughter of wildlife for commercial purposes.

- *Promotion of public awareness raising and public education on risks of bushmeat consumption:* The traditional, cultural and livelihood implications of impending wildlife extinctions are still not effectively understood by most Africans. With recent reports of potential links between bushmeat consumption and HIV (the virus that causes AIDS in humans), there is need to use this critical message as part of a large-scale effort to change attitudes towards bushmeat hunting and consumption.
- *Promotion of research on sustainable hunting:* There is need to continuously increase understanding of wildlife population dynamics by conducting research and monitoring to determine the practicality of sustainable hunting for long-term survivability of animal populations.

I thank you very much once again, Mr. Chairman, and applaud the efforts of this House Subcommittee in its attempt to understand the ramifications of this critically important conservation challenge in Africa. We look forward to working with you on any initiative that will emerge from this oversight hearing.