

Testimony of Dr. Amy Vedder
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before the
Subcommittee on Fisheries and Oceans
Committee on Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
regarding the
“Great Ape Conservation Reauthorization Act of 2005” (H.R. 2693)
June 23, 2005

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you very much for the opportunity to comment on the *Great Ape Conservation Reauthorization Act of 2005*. I am Dr. Amy Vedder, Vice President of International Conservation and Director of the Living Landscapes Program of the Wildlife Conservation Society. Founded with the help of Theodore Roosevelt in 1895, the Wildlife Conservation Society conserves wildlife and wild lands – with more than 300 terrestrial and marine conservation projects throughout the Americas, Africa and Asia - and manages the world's largest network of urban wildlife parks in New York, including our flagship Bronx Zoo. Personally, I have had the fortune of spending more than 2500 hours observing gorillas in their forest home, assessing their ecological requirements for survival, as well as the challenge and satisfaction of working directly for their conservation in the wild since 1979. I've seen first-hand the beheaded bodies of gorillas killed by poachers in Rwanda, hands and meat for sale in markets in Congo, the illegal logging of gorilla habitats in Gabon, and forests completely cleared for palm oil plantations in Cameroon. But I have also worked directly to help a critically-endangered population of gorillas turn the corner and increase by over 50 percent under challenging conditions. So I am here today to say that with a concerted effort, with continued support, we can make a difference for these, and other great ape, populations. The degree of difference we make will be determined by the consistency and magnitude of that support.

When I testified before this Committee in 2000 in support of the original authorization of the Great Apes Conservation Act, gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos, orangutans, and gibbons around the world were all classified as endangered – some critically so. They were facing severe threats to their continued existence from loss of their forest habitats, illegal hunting, and war and insecurity.

These threats remain - some increasing in significance, some quantified for the first time - and new ones have emerged. We now know that the hunting and sale of wild meat (bushmeat) has surpassed habitat loss as the primary threat to great apes. Low reproduction rates among great apes coupled with current levels of hunting threaten the long term survival of all apes within the Congo Basin and West Africa. From Indonesia to India to China, all of Asia's lesser ape species are intensively poached for meat and trade. We have begun to assess the results of war and lack of governance in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where preliminary results show that some bonobo populations have been significantly reduced. We have since documented the impact of the vast fires of the late 1990s: resulting in nearly 30 percent decline in numbers of orangutans in large portions of Borneo. In the interim we have also discovered that diseases such as ebola hemorrhagic fever and anthrax are contributing to rapid and widespread losses of chimps and gorillas in central Africa: for example, causing well over 90 percent loss of these species in Minkebe National Park of Gabon. An ebola epidemic is currently sweeping eastward through the Odzala National Park in the Congo Republic with similar results.

While the situation remains critical, I'm pleased to testify today that the enactment of the Great Ape Conservation Act of 1999 and the relatively modest funding provided to individual initiatives have helped dedicated African and Asian conservationists to overcome tremendous obstacles to protect great apes. I will cite examples I know best, selected from the array of programs of the Wildlife Conservation Society that have received funding from the US FWS Great Ape Fund since its inception.

In the remote forests of northern Republic of Congo, the Great Ape Fund is supporting Wildlife Conservation Society conservationists in undertaking an in-depth assessment of the effects of logging on chimpanzees, the African ape that appears to be most severely affected by timber extraction operations. By comparing populations of chimpanzees prior to logging, after logging and in non-logged areas over time in the Goualougo Triangle, we will for the first time ever be able to identify the impacts of timber extraction practices on chimp behavior and survivorship. Working directly with timber companies we are already setting high standards for wildlife protection and management, including preventing hunting of both chimps and gorillas – both legally-protected endangered species – and establishing reserves of key, unlogged habitat for them within logging concessions. With the results of these chimp assessments we will be able to identify particular management practices that will avoid negative impacts and foster their survival.

Lowland gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos have suffered tremendously in the war-torn regions of Africa, but our data show that there is room for cautious optimism if the situation within parks can be stabilized and community conservation

activities initiated and maintained. One source of limited optimism was the outcome of Great Ape funded-Wildlife Conservation Society surveys of eastern lowland (Grauer's) gorillas in the mountains of Democratic Republic of Congo's Kahuzi-Biega National Park. While reported to have lost 70 percent of its gorillas during the waves of war that ravaged the region, this first post-war assessment documented the presence of 168 Grauer's gorillas. While this is down from the pre-war high of 260, it's about 50 more gorillas than confirmed in 2000. That there are any gorillas still in the forest at the epicenter of the civil war and so close to the largest refugee camps, is a testament to the valor and commitment of the park guards and conservationists who maintained their work throughout the armed conflict. Coordinated support from both the Great Ape Fund and the USAID Gorilla Directive played a significant role in this measurable conservation success. Wildlife Conservation Society field staff and the Congolese Park Service are now poised to assess and help mitigate the impacts of illegal mining and associated hunting of gorillas and chimpanzees in the richest lowlands of the national park, with the continued support of the Great Ape Fund.

Regarding the most endangered type of gorillas, we now know there are between 250 and 300 gorillas in populations across the Cameroon-Nigeria highlands, due in part to complementary funding from the Great Ape Fund and the Gorilla Directive. The continuation of Great Ape and Gorilla Directive funds is being used to develop conservation infrastructure, park service support, and land-use management plans that are the only hope for the long-term survival of these critically endangered gorillas.

Increased park patrols, implementation of management plans, reliable surveys and community education funded by the Great Ape Fund have all contributed to the survival of Asia's great apes in the face of intense pressure. In Cambodia's Mondul Kiri forest, one of the last populations of Yellow-cheeked Gibbons was in serious decline due to hunting. With critical support from the Great Ape Fund, in 2002 the Wildlife Conservation Society installed gibbon-monitoring systems, increased the number of wildlife patrols, and put in place a sound management plan for the resources. Since that time Yellow-Cheeked Gibbons are no longer found in local markets, and Mondul Kiri's gibbon population has markedly increased. In the Nam Ha Protected Area of Laos People's Democratic Republic the number of known locations of Western black crested gibbons has increased due to Great Ape funding. These represent an expansion of the known distribution of Western black crested gibbons in Lao PDR and are the only known populations to occur inside the national protected area system.

As demonstrated by this handful of examples of Wildlife Conservation Society programs supported by the Great Ape Fund, the Great Ape Conservation Act has played a significant role in mobilizing funds and interest in protecting chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, orangutans and gibbons. The measurable successes we have had since it was authorized speak loudly of its importance and value to date. Reauthorization of the act is critical at this time. We face increased challenges as disease outbreaks and trafficking of wildlife - or bushmeat - sweep across forests harboring great apes.

At the Lossi Gorilla Sanctuary in the Republic of Congo, nearly 50 percent of the gorillas died between June 2002 and March 2003 due to an ebola outbreak – a loss of about 600 gorillas in one wave of disease. As we speak today, great apes continue to die in Odzala National Park. Working in the field, Wildlife Conservation Society veterinarians are learning that wildlife mortalities often precede human deaths, and can serve as an early warning for national health workers to reach out to local people and help protect themselves from the disease. Community education and training programs are mitigating the risks of deadly disease transmission between great apes and humans, while capacity-building among local health workers is improving their ability to respond to new outbreaks. In many countries, we are providing training to local veterinary workers on monitoring great ape health for a wide range of diseases and linking them with the national public health authorities. With the support of the Great Ape Fund, we have hosted Africans from eight range countries to share their successes and failures in tackling these significant human-wildlife disease risks. Battling ebola will be extremely difficult, and will require a concerted approach and full coordination.

Despite the ravages of ebola, illegal hunting and trade of apes is a greater threat to their survival. It is important to note that all great apes, in all host countries, are fully protected under national laws. Enforcement of these laws lags significantly behind. In central and west Africa, the bushmeat trade is facilitated by unconcerned logging companies, exploiting timber in even the most isolated regions due to the globally-increasing value of wood. In Myanmar, even the most remote populations of hoolock gibbons are now regularly hunted by foreign poachers for trade. Apes and other wildlife killed deep within a forest can be transported 1,000 miles to be sold in the food markets of capital cities in time for Sunday dinner. An orangutan left in an isolated tree in an oil palm plantation can be captured for sale as a pet. In a growing number of places, support from the Great Ape Fund has helped governments to understand and control this unregulated flow of wildlife onto the plates of city dwellers – folks that eat wildlife because it is a luxury, not because they are lacking alternatives, or folks that are intrigued by owning an ape as a household pet. The Wildlife Conservation Society is monitoring timber company operations in countries including the Congo Republic and Cambodia to reduce bushmeat consumption and trade. Eco-guards enforce the rules of no hunting of protected species – including apes, and no exporting of bushmeat outside the immediate community; and the timber company provides alternative sources of protein to its employees and enforces its regulations prohibiting truck drivers from transporting hunters and wild meat. There is a tremendous need to replicate these risky but successful

pilot projects in additional sites, as the combination of education and enforcement has proven effective in keeping wildlife alive and in the forest - not dead, in bloody bags on the way to a bushmeat market.

Battling disease and illegal hunting is growing increasingly critical. But also required is the need to establish and effectively manage parks and wildlife reserves, to work with small communities and big private enterprises – individuals and institutions - to ensure a safe environment for apes outside these reserves, and to strengthen the concern and capacity of both government and non-government personnel to promote and manage such efforts. As a result, Great Ape funding has and can continue to play a critical role in managing, monitoring, and sustaining these great apes and the forest communities that shelter them.

The Wildlife Conservation Society applauds this Congress for taking a leadership role in continuing to protect great apes around the world. As drafted, this reauthorization legislation would provide important renewed support for gorilla, chimpanzee, bonobo, gibbon and orangutan conservation in Africa and Asia and would continue to underscore the United States' principled vision on this issue. Wildlife conservation organizations like ours have been able to match these funds with support from foundations, European partners, and with gifts from a broad range of Americans – irrespective of wealth, career, age, or political affiliation - to realize an even greater value to the U.S. Government's contribution. The Wildlife Conservation Society urges the Congress to reauthorize the Great Ape Conservation Act and fully fund it at its reauthorized level. We encourage you to do this while maintaining and extending other existing complementary, successful programs of the US FWS and USAID that also serve conservation. The Wildlife Conservation Society also supports H.R. 518, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Improvement Act.

I thank you again for the opportunity to comment and to work with you on this bill. I would be happy to answer any questions.