

Testimony of Bhagavan “Doc” Antle
Director of The Institute of Greatly Endangered and Rare Species
before the
House Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife
January 27, 2010

Thank you Madam Chair, Ranking Member Brown and Members of the Subcommittee. On behalf of T.I.G.E.R.S., I am honored to be before you today to provide public comment on H.R. 4416, the “Great Ape Conservation Reauthorization Amendments Act of 2010”. The United States’ leadership in the conservation of these species around the world is vital to their survival.

T.I.G.E.R.S., is based in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and we operate four public education exhibits; two in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, one in Miami, Florida, as well as a yearly production in the Boston, Massachusetts area. The wildlife ambassadors at our facilities; great apes, big cats, elephant and a stunning group of other highly interactive species, offer our guests a collection of experiences that can be life changing. During these encounters our guests connect with wildlife in a very intimate way that personally involves them in the lives of these amazing animals. They then walk away into the world with a desire to save these creatures and help preserve their environments.

T.I.G.E.R.S. is a commercial public display operation. We are proud of the education we provide the public and equally proud of being able to give back to the natural resources we have benefited from living with, such as orangutans. Social responsibility is very important to me and my team at T.I.G.E.R.S. Since 1983, T.I.G.E.R.S. has carried out conservation efforts through our Rare Species Fund. The Rare Species Fund receives its financing base through a percentage of revenues taken in by T.I.G.E.R.S., the generosity of donations from exhibit guests, and the general public. The Rare Species Fund was established to provide critical on the ground funding to international wildlife conservation programs, thereby complimenting and enhancing the educational messages and field research of T.I.G.E.R.S. Preferably, the Rare Species Fund looks for donating resources to established programs that cooperate with governments. Allowing a conservation program to use our donation as a “matching fund” in order to be leveraged for additional dollars is something we strongly favor.

T.I.G.E.R.S. commends the United States for its work and support through the Great Ape Conservation Act. The monies provided have been beneficial in protecting ape species from human and natural threats. Of particular interest to T.I.G.E.R.S. is work focused on Orangutans and their habitat.

As the Committee is aware, Orangutans are the largest tree-climbing mammals in the world and only live in the lush island tropical forests of Borneo and Sumatra. Unfortunately, these forests are being destroyed to make way for palm oil plantations. T.I.G.E.R.S., through its conservation program, the Rare Species Fund, has invested in the planting of trees to replenish the rainforest in Borneo, as part of an ongoing forestry restoration program. We also are providing financial support to allow increased patrols of the National Park to protect against illegal logging and mining. With our funding, we have facilitated the ability

of local authorities to hire additional police, patrol equipment and supplies to carry out the mission.

T.I.G.E.R.S. is also supporting efforts in Africa's Congo Basin, a key region that receives funding under the Great Ape Conservation Act. Africa's Congo Basin is home to many species of apes, including 125,000 recently discovered western lowland gorillas. The international community, initially led by the founders of the U.S. Congressional International Conservation Caucus and the U.S. State Department, have partnered to support the countries of the Congo Basin toward sustainable management of the forests through the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP).

The International Conservation Caucus Foundation (ICCF), with whom T.I.G.E.R.S. is a proud partner, recently hosted a Congo Basin Forest Partnership Heads of State Summit in Washington, DC. This summit brought together leaders of CBFP host and donor nations, as well as the corporate and NGO communities, to discuss the progress of the CBFP and present a vision for the partnership for the future.

The CBFP has become a showcase for U.S. conservation leadership, but the job is not finished. As with projects focused in Borneo and Sumatra for Orangutans, there is strong consensus that increased funding is needed now for all the ape species. Congress authorized the Great Ape Conservation Act's Fund at a far greater level than has ever been sought by an Administration and certainly more than what Congress has historically appropriated. The time to fully fund the Great Ape Conservation Act is long over due. For the sake of ape species around the world, The United States needs to back up its commitments to levels more in line with those of other donor nations.

T.I.G.E.R.S. commends the Committee for working to reauthorize the Great Ape Conservation Act. We thank the author, Mr. Miller of California for his continued engagement on seeing this program succeed. While we support the section of H.R. 4416 that reauthorizes this critical program, we have concerns specific to amendments that the author is seeking to add. As currently drafted, we cannot endorse these other sections unless they are amended to address our concerns. These are:

1) Composition of the "Panel of Experts".

We support the amendment to require the Secretary to convene the Panel. To date, this is something that has not happened since first becoming law a decade ago. However, there remains a critical need to provide the Secretary guidance on what the composition of the Panel is to consist of. We request that language be included to ensure a balance of viewpoints, backgrounds, geographic and species expertise, as well as certainty that the private sector and commercial public display community will be represented on the Panel.

2) Consideration of "conservation plans or strategies" by the Panel.

We support the language that intends to guide the Panel to take into consideration professionally established global, regional and ape specific strategies, such as those put in place by governments and quasi-government organizations.

However, we question the benefit paragraph (2)(D) has to the program and to that of ape species. We have reviewed the "Mission Statement" of the advocacy coalition listed in the paragraph and remain unclear how this qualifies such a group for participation in developing conservation strategies, let alone have priority in what information the Panel of Experts is to consider. I ask the Committee what this organization's unique or special skill set is they are bringing to the table that others do not possess.

We encourage the Committee to delete paragraph (2)(D). We note that by deleting this paragraph and retaining the current language in paragraph (E), the Committee will accomplish the same intent.

Madam Chair, I thank the Subcommittee for considering my comments. I hope our suggestions for amendments can be easily adopted before the Committee passes H.R. 4416. Without these changes, we are concerned over the future success of the Great Ape Conservation Act. I welcome any questions you and the Members of the Subcommittee may have.