Testimony for the Record
Submitted to the
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife
For the Hearing
"H.R. 2245. A bill to amend the Endangered Species Act of 1973 to prohibit import and export of any species listed or proposed to be listed under such Act as a threatened or endangered species, and for other purposes. 'Cecil Act'"
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Chairman Jared Huffman, Ranking Member McClintock and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing. It is a great honor to appear before you to share my experience as Director of the Lion Center at the University of Minnesota. My research, training and outreach work has focused on African lions for over 40 years. I headed a prominent lion project in Tanzania from 1978 to 2015. My research on the potential impacts of sport hunting on lions directly led to changes in wildlife policy in Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. I represented the United Republic of Tanzania as part of their delegation to CITES in 2004, and I was also asked by the Tanzanian government to investigate a serious outbreak of man-eating lions as well as to analyze their CITES records to measure the impacts of past hunting practices on lion offtakes. I collated most of the data on lion population status across Africa that led to the current Red List status of lions at IUCN, and I advised USFWS during their deliberations to list the African lion as Threatened or Endangered. I currently advise the Namibian Government and continue to conduct lion research in Botswana, Kenya, Namibia and South Africa.

I have just returned from six weeks in Kenya and South Africa, where I was once again reminded of the importance of wildlife conservation. Since my first trip to Tanzania as a college student, I have witnessed firsthand the impacts of the rapidly growing human population on Africa's remaining wildlife populations. Land is rapidly being converted to agriculture, and livestock are ever closer to the wildlife reserves. But wildlife tourism remains a powerful engine for Africa's economic development and an essential incentive for protecting natural habitats. To ensure the conservation of lions into the next century, range-state wildlife authorities will need to use every available tool. Ecotourism is a powerful incentive for maintaining wildlife habitat, but only a few areas are suitable for photo-tourism. There is still the problem of what Ernest Hemingway once labeled the "million miles of bloody Africa" that is so hot, flat and boring that few visitors would ever be inclined to visit. This vast estate has long been the purview of the sport hunting industry. But the dramatic loss in wildlife numbers across Africa has happened on their watch. While sport hunting was seen as the way to protect the lesser-visited wildlife areas, hunting revenues have not succeeded in protecting elephants, giraffe, rhinos, cheetahs or lions – all of which have suffered enormous losses in the past 30 yrs.

This is not to say that sport hunting should be banned, but it is in desperate need of reform. Sport hunting has been demonstrably successful in protecting wildlife in the community conservancies of Namibia, and privately-run wildlife reserves in South Africa and Zimbabwe.. Botswana's hunting ban in 2014 was ill-advised and counterproductive and has recently been reversed. But in Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia, the government-run hunting reserves have been so poorly managed that a substantial number of hunting blocks are now unclaimed, with the risk that the land will be removed from the wildlife estate, as there is no alternative to sport hunting in these areas.

In my statement below, I outline the history of sport hunting in Africa and discuss recent reforms that reduce the risks of overhunting. But I also emphasize the overarching challenge of relying on sport hunting as a sustainable tool for conservation: the costs of effective lion conservation are about \$1,000-\$2,000/km^2/yr, whereas trophy fees come nowhere close to enough to provide the necessary funding. The annual shortfall in Tanzania alone is close to half a billion dollars, and the country harvests less than a hundred lions per year. Trophy fees for lions are less than \$25,000 throughout all of Africa, thus the fees for the most important trophy species like lions, elephants, leopards and Cape buffalo should be increased by at least five-fold to even come close to covering the costs of protecting their natural habitat.

As to the specifics of H.R. 2245, although most of the bill makes good sense, I have concerns about Section 3, point 4. This wording does not allow the possibility of reform in Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. I am personally familiar with Tanzania's lack of transparency and their willingness to exaggerate the size of their lion population. For example, I am listed as co-author to a report claiming that Tanzania is home to over 17,000 lions – but that document was written without my knowledge. I was also expelled from Tanzania in 2015 for warning USFWS about corruption in Tanzania's wildlife sector. I was soon replaced by an individual with funding from Safari Club International, so I am clearly not a favorite of the hunting industry. Nevertheless, without incentives to reform, Tanzania could well lose even more of its hunting blocks. Over half of their hunting blocks have been abandoned in the past 11 yrs. The US government has few levers to pull with the Tanzanians, and a permanent ban would remove one of them. As written, the current bill would take away an important avenue of influence.

Finally, a spectrum of hunting activities can be found in almost every range state. Ideally, the legislation would allow importation from the private reserves in Zimbabwe, for example, even if the government-run hunting areas are found to be seriously mismanaged. In Mozambique, a successful lion-monitoring system has been established in the hunting blocks of Niassa Reserve while little oversight exists elsewhere in the rest of the country. Thus, I would urge that USFWS staff be sent to each country to evaluate hunting practices in the major wildlife areas and that importations be allowed or prohibited according to point of origin within the country. A fine-grained approach could again provide an opportunity to improve hunting practices through positive engagement.

Background

Lions have drawn sport hunters to Africa since the time of Theodore Roosevelt and Ernest Hemingway, and many of the continent's national parks were expressly created to prevent vulnerable species such as lions from being overhunted. Hunting blocks in surrounding areas were often established as buffer zones to protect local people from dangerous animals that moved outwards from wildlife hotspots such as the Serengeti or Kruger.

In the past quarter century, the rapidly growing human population in Africa has cleared extensive acreage of wildlife habitat for agriculture and brought livestock ever closer to the National Parks and Game Reserves. As lions on the margins lose their normal prey, they rely on livestock for food or even become man-eaters and are quickly killed in retaliation. Across Africa, lion numbers are estimated to have declined by more than 40% over the past 25 years, primarily because of habitat conversion, loss of prey, and human-lion conflict.[1]

The impacts of sport hunting have been mixed. Lions are thriving in a number of privately managed hunting blocks in South Africa and Zimbabwe, as well as in the community conservancies in Namibia which combine sport hunting with photo-tourism. But the government-run hunting programs in Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe are poorly managed and vulnerable to corruption. Government representatives provide little oversight to prevent the disposal of inferior trophies after a larger specimen has been shot or to assure that trophy animals were actually shot in the blocks for which the licenses were issued.

Governmental practices have also encouraged a culture of over-consumption. For example, for many years Tanzanian leaseholders were required to treat their quotas as production targets rather than as limits. Underperforming operators risked losing their leases, and little to no effort was made to lower the quotas when harvests fell irreversibly, and statistical analysis suggested that excessive trophy offtakes directly contributed to lion population declines in a substantial number of Tanzania's hunting blocks.[2]

Current status of lion hunting

Many African countries have recently adopted reforms to minimize the risks of overharvest. Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe all prohibit the harvest of any lion younger than six years of age, so as to minimize the frequency of infanticide by incoming males.[3] Although the age minimum has reduced the number of lions shot each year, the degree of transparency in the government-run age-assessment systems varies from country to country, so it is not known if the rules have been applied consistently or if well-connected operators are able to skirt the rules – or even if their declining lion offtakes are simply the result of falling lion numbers in the hunting blocks.

While sport hunting can bring financial value to wildlife, the costs of maintaining lion habitat are far greater than commonly realized. Separate analyses have suggested a cost of $1,000-2,000/km^2 to provide sufficient protection to maintain lions at 50% of their potential carrying capacity.[4-5] With over 200,000 km^2 of hunting estate, Tanzania should invest $200-400 million/year to conserve their blocks, whereas total hunting revenues only contribute about

$20 million/year to the Tanzanian economy – and only a proportion of these funds are returned to conservation. Unsurprisingly, over half of Tanzania's hunting blocks have been abandoned in the past dozen years, as they have failed to generate enough funds to protect their wildlife.

However, the recent ban in Botswana demonstrates the risks of suddenly eliminating hunting revenues in rural communities.[6] Sport hunting was well regulated in Botswana, and companies made meaningful payments to a number of local communities. In announcing the ban, the Botswana Government promised to compensate villages for the loss of hunting payments until the shortfall could be made up from photo-tourism income. However, the payments were never made, and many hunting areas failed to attract photo-tourists. Illegal wildlife killings and complaints of problem animals soon skyrocketed. In fact, high levels of human-wildlife conflict have been instrumental in Botswana's recent decision to end its ban on elephant hunting.

The overall proportion of unclaimed hunting blocks is now 52% in Tanzania, 34% in Zambia and 15% in Mozambique, and most blocks have been abandoned within the past 10 yrs. The majority of vacant blocks are located closest to human-occupied areas, where illegal offtakes by local people are highest. However, the legacy of under-investment in conservation management is not the only crisis facing Africa's hunting estate. Post "Cecil," public opposition to sport hunting has increased, and lion hunters like Walter Palmer have been publicly shamed and threatened. This may help to explain why the Tanzanian Wildlife Authority was only able to find leaseholders for 3 of 26 vacant hunting blocks that were put up for auction in June 2019.

Reactive sport hunting

Successful lion conservation efforts can lead to rapid population recoveries, and neighboring human communities face very real risks to their personal safety and financial security. For example, an outbreak of man-eating lions in southern Tanzania killed 600 people between 1990-2004. Following the initiation of large-scale conservation in the Skeleton Coast/Kunene region of Namibia, lion numbers increased twentyfold over a 16 yr period, but this growth has been followed by a six-year drought, and lions have increasingly turned to livestock in response to declining prey populations. Within 10 yrs of the formation of the Mara Conservancies in southwestern Kenya, the Olare Motorogi and Naboisho Conservancies now hold the highest lion densities in Africa, and dispersing subadults routinely move into surrounding cattle-pastures where they are quickly eliminated by local pastoralists.

Many of the fenced reserves in South Africa also require active interventions as lions frequently drive prey populations towards local extinction. Until recently, many reserve managers relied on sport hunting as a strategy for reducing lion numbers, but the post-Cecil stigma prevents managers of photo-tourist destinations from selling lion hunts, and they instead rely on covert chemical euthanasia and contraception.

Numerous conservation groups are seeking to substantially increase the number of lions in Africa, despite the fact that far less lion habitat is available today than 25 yrs ago, and the human population in Africa is expected to quadruple in the next 50 years. If successful, large-scale lion conservation will further fuel the movement of excess lions into human-dominated

landscapes and even more lions will remain trapped within fenced reserves that are too small to allow co-existence of predators and prey. Thus, there will be an increasing need to remove excess animals.

If left to their own, local communities mostly eliminate unwanted predators by lacing livestock carcasses with poison, a technique that frequently kills other scavengers such as vultures and kills far more lions than are shot by trophy hunters. Wildlife authorities in many countries try to capture problem animals and relocate them to new areas, but these efforts generally end in failure. In India, translocated problem leopards often end up attacking humans at the release site, and, in several African countries, translocated lions mostly either return to the original site of capture or die shortly after release.

Thus, there may be increasing pressure to raise conservation revenues by charging sport hunters for the opportunity to remove problem animals. However, such programs should be subject to careful oversight to prevent "every lion from becoming a problem lion" and to ensure a rapid response so as to minimize threats to vulnerable communities.

Recommendations:

1. Allow lion trophy imports into the US from only those countries that can demonstrate positive impacts from their current hunting practices (as specified in Section 3 of H.R. 2245).
2. Require the posting of USFWS staff in each range state so as to confirm compliance with the state's own hunting policies.
3. Encourage direct linkages between hunting-concession holders with NGO's that help to oversee compliance with the range state's policies.
4. Expedite the importation of trophies that originated in hunting blocks that have been verified by USFWS/NGO's as having followed best practices.
5. Regulate importation of trophies of problem lions that are collected as part of a well-verified pest-control program.
6. Encourage the American hunting industry to act as agents of reform by identifying and rewarding operators that engage in best practices.

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