

**Statement of
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**Before the
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
on
“Poaching American Security: Impacts of Illegal Wildlife Trade.”
Full Committee Oversight Hearing
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Chairman Rahall, Ranking Member Young, and members of the Committee, I am John Hart, a wildlife scientist and conservationist based in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I have been involved with a range of wildlife conservation and natural resource management projects in Congo and Central Africa over the past 20 years. I am grateful for the opportunity to present information to help the committee develop a perspective on what, in my opinion, is a problem of growing international significance.

My experience in Central Africa includes developing a regional monitoring program for illegal elephant killing for CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) across five nations, training park guards and national wildlife research staff, and establishment and management of protected areas. I have been involved since its inception with the US initiated Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE), funded through USAID to develop the institutional basis for conservation and forest management in some of the most important remaining tropical rain forest landscapes in Central Africa. Pertinent to the subject of this oversight hearing, over the past decade I have led teams of national wildlife biologists in DRC into some of the most remote and important remaining wildlife areas of the country. This has given me first hand knowledge of the extent and threats posed by illegal wildlife trade.

An entrenched problem

There is a long tradition of the use of wildlife products in Central Africa. Bushmeat remains an important subsistence food for many communities which have little access to

domestic sources of meat. Over the last two decades, however, the use of wildlife has left the realm of local subsistence needs in many areas and become an increasingly lucrative trade commodity.

In Central Africa, wildlife trade ranges from the poorly regulated provisioning and sale of bushmeat through local trading networks to illegal poaching of elephants and smuggling of ivory across international borders. The traditional actors in the wildlife trade include local subsistence hunters and small scale market traders. Their ranks have been joined by growing numbers of professional hunters and large scale traders. Many of the professional hunters are associated with national security forces that provide them with arms and ammunition. Direct economic benefits of wildlife trade, including payoffs in the illegal trade in ivory, implicate highly placed public figures in the administration and national security forces in many African countries. Recent and ongoing rebel and insurgent activities are linked to occupation of national parks, poaching and illegal wildlife trade in DR Congo, Central African Republic, Chad, Sudan and Uganda.

The diversity of wildlife species entering the illegal trade, the often unclear boundary between subsistence hunting and commercial scale poaching and the failure to recognize the national and regional significance of illegal wildlife trade, represent some of the greatest challenges in managing and controlling hunting in Central Africa. These challenges increase with growing demand from distant markets. Commercial trade of a wide range of wildlife and other wild harvested products including plants is growing and diversifying as African economies are opened to growing global trade.

I would like to state that at no time in my experience in Central Africa have I ever documented a direct link between illegal wildlife trade and an immediate threat to American security. Nevertheless there is increasing evidence that the internal and international trade in wildlife and wildlife parts, including a number of endangered species, poses threats to entire ecosystems and also increases the potential of disease outbreaks. The illegal wildlife trade is one of the most strongly corrupting influences of national administrations and particularly national police and security forces, many of

whose members are directly involved in fostering and permitting poaching and illegal trade in a number of the countries where I have worked over the past two decades.

I would like to touch on several of these themes briefly, providing evidence, based on my experience. I will conclude with observations on what I see is an important role for US leadership in combating illegal wildlife trade in Africa.

Undermining the potential for wildlife to contribute to sustainable development

Central Africans, including both rural and urban communities remain strongly dependent upon local natural resources for their subsistence and economy. Poaching and illegal wildlife trade undermines this economic base. Two recent cases in DRC, both with regional implications, illustrate the potential significance: Illegal killing of hippopotamus over the past ten years around Lake Edward, on the Ugandan-Congolese border, reduced populations from over 10,000 to just a few hundred. The hippos are a key component in the food chain linking adjacent terrestrial savannas with the lake, through their fertilization of the lake waters after nocturnal grazing. The elimination of the hippos, combined with unregulated and illegal over fishing, has led to a collapse of one of Congo's most productive fisheries, undermining a regional economic base. There is now a growing demand to protect the remaining hippos, including ending the trade in poached hippo meat, and control the illegal fishing practices to permit the recovery of the fisheries.

The second case involves the internationally celebrated mountain gorillas who occupy a range of volcanoes straddling three national borders in what is arguably one of the most dangerously instable regions in Africa. These gorillas constitute the basis for a unique and economically important tourism in the region. Earlier this year the Congolese side of the volcanoes was occupied by a renegade military general turned rebel and a number of gorillas were killed, with additional suggestions of trade in gorilla babies. The response has been international mobilization for protection of the gorillas and their mountain homeland, including an unprecedented agreement among the three countries to cooperate in increasing security and patrolling of the massif. This is a positive first step.

While not all places or wildlife can have such high prominence, commercial scale hunting and illegal wildlife trade often benefit only a few while depleting local subsistence resources used by and supporting many. In Central Africa, the commercial bushmeat trade almost always breaks important links between wildlife and livelihoods and undermines conservation efforts and investments to establish sustainable use of fragile natural environments.

Illegal wildlife trade and emergent diseases.

Illegal trade in wildlife has been implicated in recent outbreaks of hemorrhagic fevers in Central Africa, most notably Ebola in Gabon and N Congo. Infected gorillas and chimpanzees were killed, handled and consumed by local villagers in the affected area, leading to a widespread disease outbreak with high mortality. The potential for recurring epidemic is present. Indeed a focus on potential disease links featured in a recent publication by one of the two primary Ugandan daily newspapers on an outbreak of hemorrhagic fever in western Uganda. The article went on to strongly support a ban on the trade of wild meat.

While the likelihood of the spread of Ebola to America is remote, other global pandemics have emerged through human-wildlife contact, including HIV-AIDS, which the evidence suggests moved from chimpanzees to humans quite possibly, as with the case of the Ebola outbreak, through handling and consumption of bush meat. Recent global outbreaks and threats of bird flu were associated with illegal trade in poultry and other possibly other birds and wildlife. Increasing international traffic of bushmeat including illegal importations into the USA, represent an unknown but potentially significant source of new infections.

Wildlife trade and persistent insecurity in Africa

Poaching and illegal wildlife trade in Central Africa weakens already fragile states by spreading military weapons into the hands of local insurgents, allowing the development of smuggling rings and favoring the corruption of officials, including the military and

national police. Hunting and trade of bushmeat and ivory directly support rogue military gangs and provide economic support for several persistent pockets of rebel activity in DRC. These include Rwandan Hutu rebels implicated in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, a major group of whom remain based in the Kahuzi-Biega National Park. Factions of the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army retained bases in DRC's Garamba National Park during their standoff—hopefully coming to an end—with the Ugandan government.

During Congo's recent civil war (1998 – 2003) illegal bushmeat and ivory were among commodities exchanged for arms and ammunition. In a three year investigation of elephant poaching and illegal ivory trade in DRC's volatile Ituri Region, from 2002 – 2005, we documented an estimated 14 tons of ivory leaving the area of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. At least two major shipments left by international helicopters chartered by the Congolese rebels. At the time of this investigation, Viktor Bout, an international arms trafficker wanted by Interpol, was operating in the region, and according to investigations done by a Belgian journalist, ivory was among the commodities Bout traded and transported. All sides in the DRC conflict were involved in the ivory trade which also implicated business men in Congo and Uganda.

While Congo's conflict has currently receded, illegal military arms continue to circulate in some areas and are used to kill elephants. Many of the poachers have contact with military hierarchy and national police who move the arms and ammunition. Large areas of DRC remain outside of effective national administrative control; some areas are in the hands of criminals. Generalized low level insecurity persists. Over the past decade our surveys, and those of colleagues, have documented direct support of DRC's military and police in major poaching and illegal trade of wildlife in all of the major wildlife ranges we have surveyed, including all five of DRC's World heritage Sites. This illegal activity continues in many areas despite the end of the Congo's decade long conflict in 2003. It persists, even as the country attempts to reorganize its military and police. Part of the problem, but certainly not all of it, has been the perceived need for the national army to incorporate former rebel combatants into the ranks. These have included well known

poachers and wildlife traffickers who use their military position as cover for continued poaching and who have in some cases implicated their authorities in the process as well.

What can be done?

We have a direct role to strengthen efforts to control arrival of illegal wildlife products, including bushmeat, into USA. Coordination with neighboring countries, in particular Canada, to ensure that third party imports are not happening may be part of the process. The need to control illegal trade in wild products, including plants is likely to grow. As the globe's biota is diminished we are increasingly seeing today's legally traded commodity become tomorrow's illegally trafficked endangered species. Illegal wildlife trade will need to be regularly monitored.

A unique opportunity to deal with security concerns raised by illegal wildlife trade presents itself with the development of the proposed United States African military command (USAFRICOM or AFRICOM). The expressed vision of AFRICOM is responsibility for U.S. military operations in and military relations with 53 African nations. While focus has been on security concerns in the Horn of Africa, and in west central oil producing region, nevertheless the fragile states across the continent are also recognized as a major concern.

AFRICOM's mandate will include training of national military and security forces. This is one point where American intervention to stem the illegal hunting and trade makes sense. American training and support should be used to foster an evaluation, corrective measures, if required, and continued monitoring of military and police involvement in illegal hunting and wildlife trade.

In DRC there is a precedence to suggest that such an approach can work. In the past, national park's staff was also implicated in illegal hunting and wildlife trade in the parks. International NGOs supporting the parks worked hard on the ground to document the abuses and put pressure on park hierarchy to bring these to an end. While it is difficult to ensure and measure compliance in all the remote areas where park staff operates,

monitoring on the ground did lead to reductions in some of the worst poaching and illegal trade. Recently publicized crackdowns on notorious poachers with military links in the Salonga National Park suggest that the political will for further controls may be present. But this needs to be followed by further action.

I can not over estimate the importance of having these efforts reach the ground, where all of the illegal hunting and illegal trade have their start. US supported programs such as CARPE can be vehicles for developing a basis for this, and improving overall prospects for good governance in use of wildlife.

The American diplomatic community should be briefed on the issue, and while I recognize that there is a limit to what can be expected of our diplomatic staff, nevertheless, they should be encouraged to monitor, and where possible provide diplomatic support to control egregious cases of poaching and illegal wildlife trade, especially where there is evidence of involvement of security forces and international trafficking rings.

The US can and should lead, but we can not and should not go alone in this endeavor. Broad based support is needed nationally in Africa, and internationally if better controls are to be brought to bear. Clarifying and bringing focus on the disease and security related links of some of the trade in illegal wildlife will be important assets in publicizing and bringing illegal wildlife trade under control.

It is important for national governments to understand the health and security dangers of illegal trade. America has every interest in a stable and well governed Africa. Rule of law is intimately linked to controlling illegal wildlife trade in many areas. Security is strengthened by bringing an end to the associated trafficking in military weapons used for hunting, and controlling cross border wildlife smuggling.

I would like to close by thanking the Committee for its interest and concern with this issue, and to commend it in taking leadership to develop a constructive and effective

response to a growing global concern. I would be happy to answer any questions members of the committee may have.