

**TESTIMONY OF TODD WILLENS, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE AND PARKS, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS, REGARDING H.R. 1464, THE GREAT CATS AND RARE CANIDS CONSERVATION ACT OF 2007, H.R. 1913, THE GREAT CATS CONSERVATION ACT OF 2007 AND H.R. 1771, THE CRANE CONSERVATION ACT OF 2007**

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Madam Chairwoman, I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss H.R. 1464, the Great Cats and Rare Canids Conservation Act of 2007, H.R. 1913, the Great Cats Conservation Act of 2007 and H.R. 1771, the Crane Conservation Act of 2007. We appreciate the Subcommittee's continued support of the Multinational Species Conservation Acts and look forward to continuing to work with the Subcommittee to conserve rare and endangered species such as those being discussed today. We support the goals of these bills, but do have some concerns which I will discuss in my testimony.

As a Party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, the Convention on Nature Protection and Wild Life Preservation in the Western Hemisphere, and other international conservation agreements, the United States plays a significant role in, and shares responsibility for, supporting and implementing measures to provide for the conservation of hundreds of species of plants and animals both domestically and abroad. As members of the Subcommittee are aware, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has a long history of proactively addressing international wildlife species conservation. The Service works with private citizens, local communities, state and federal agencies, foreign governments, native peoples and non-governmental organizations in promoting coordinated domestic and international strategies to protect, restore, and enhance the world's diverse wildlife and habitats.

The Multinational Species Conservation Acts encourage and assist efforts to conserve some of the world's most ecologically and sociologically important wildlife species through on-the-ground actions and other related conservation measures. There are specific programs for:

- African elephants,
- Asian elephants,
- Rhinoceros and Tigers,
- Great Apes, and
- Marine turtles.

The grant programs established by these Acts provide technical and cost-sharing grant assistance to countries for conservation of their species and habitats. The projects funded by these Acts represent cooperative efforts involving local CITES Management Authorities and their governments, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector. These Acts reflect our strong national commitment to help support conservation programs of the target species in the

wild. Significant funding from outside partners has greatly expanded the Service's efforts to make these on-the-ground conservation programs successful.

Although serious threats to the conservation of species and their habitats still loom in many areas of the world, and the illegal global trade in wildlife presents new dangers, the Multinational Species Conservation Acts have significantly helped in the conservation of species such as the African elephant, the Asian elephant, the Black Rhinoceros, the Javan Rhinoceros, the Amur Tiger, gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, gibbons, and marine sea turtles including Kemp's Ridley, Olive Ridley, Loggerhead, Leatherback, Hawksbill, and Green turtles. The success of the Multinational Species Conservation Funds has shown that relatively modest sums, if judiciously applied to well-designed and well-implemented projects, can leverage considerable resources and, just as importantly, increase the involvement of communities, governments, and the world. As a direct result of funds made available by the Multinational Species Conservation Acts, in-country wildlife professionals are more effectively managing their country's wildlife and habitat resources. Working with our international partners, some of whom are testifying today, we see clear signs of the effectiveness of our combined efforts. The lessons we learn encourage optimism and help point the way to increased conservation in a world of increasing threats to wildlife and biodiversity.

The Administration recognizes the significant benefits derived from the current Multinational Species Conservation Funds and other Fish and Wildlife Service International programs. The President's FY 2008 budget includes \$4.3 million for the species currently covered by the Multinational Conservation Fund. Future funding requests to implement H.R. 1771, H.R. 1464, and H.R. 1913 would have to compete with other priority projects for funds. We welcome the opportunity to discuss with the Subcommittee the concept of a Multinational Species Conservation Act that would cover a broad array of international species, rather than highlighting specific species. This approach would allow us to bring focused assistance on the ground to a wide variety of species, some of which are perilously near extinction.

### **H.R. 1771, the Crane Conservation Act of 2007**

Cranes are threatened by habitat loss resulting from conversion of wetlands and grasslands, intentional and unintentional poisoning, live trapping, collisions with utility lines disease and a general lack of public awareness. Cranes are present on all continents except South America and, throughout the world, crane species are declining. Seven species and two sub-species are already listed as endangered under the ESA. All fifteen species of crane are recognized as in need of protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), CITES and/or the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Red List of Endangered Species.

In addition to serving critical ecological functions, cranes are given significant cultural importance throughout the world. Their unique calls, dances and astounding migrations of up to 5,000 kilometers (km) at heights of up to 10,000 meters have given them a place in human literature, art and mythology since pre-historic times. They are revered as symbols of longevity, good luck and happiness around the world. Additionally, their migratory and seasonal movements often cross national borders requires international coordination for effective

conservation and makes them important international ambassadors. For example, Red-crowned Cranes and White-naped Cranes breed along the Amur River, which serves as the border between Russia and China, and they migrate through several countries to nest in Japan and China. Conservation efforts for these two species have created a common goal for communities, organization and governments of several countries despite underlying political differences.

Two of the crane species identified in H.R. 1771, the Whooping Crane and the Mississippi Sandhill Crane, are endemic to North America. The Service has been working with our partners on a number of efforts to recover both of these species. After ceasing to nest in the United States, dedicated conservation efforts have increased the population of Whooping Cranes from 14 adults in 1938 to nearly 400 today. There are approximately 130 Mississippi Sandhill cranes, and they can be found on and adjacent to the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge near Gautier, Mississippi. In fiscal year 2006, the Service spent about \$1.0 million on Whooping Cranes conservation activities and \$390,200 on Sandhill Crane conservation activities.

The Administration has some concerns with H.R. 1771. As stated above, we note that there are no funds in the President's FY 2008 budget to implement the legislation, and any future funding requests would have to compete with other priority projects for funds. Section 8 of H.R. 1771 requires the Secretary to establish a "Crane Conservation Fund" using \$25 million in appropriated funding, some or all of which would be reallocated from priority areas unrelated to this Act. This language is unique to H.R. 1771 and does not follow the precedents of the other Multinational Species Conservation Acts. This provision would negatively affect the budgetary responsibilities of the Secretary of the Interior to fund programs within the Department, and as such, the Administration strongly opposes it and recommends it be deleted.

The Administration also objects to the language in Section 6 of H.R. 1771 that provides investment authority. In general, the Administration does not support legislative provisions that provide investment authority to fund program activities. Investment authority provides additional funds to a program that would otherwise accrue to the general Treasury, thus limiting the ability of the President and Congress to determine spending based on current priorities and budgets. The Administration strongly opposes this section and recommends it be deleted.

The Administration is also concerned that the definition of "conservation" under section 4 of H.R. 1771 includes the acquisition of habitat, including lands outside of the United States. Although habitat acquisition may assist the conservation of species, there may be significant risks and political ramifications associated with the acquisition of land outside of the United States. While not expressly prohibited under all of the Multinational Species Conservation Act, the Service has chosen to not fund habitat acquisition in foreign countries under these Acts. Having this policy in place has been a pillar to the success of the overall program.

The Administration also opposes the language in H.R. 1771 enabling the Secretary to spend up to 20 percent of the Fund on the two North American species, the Whooping crane and the Mississippi Sandhill crane. The Service already funds conservation and recovery program for these species through a number of Service programs, and we believe that including them in H.R. 1771 would be duplicative of the Service's existing efforts.

As I mentioned above, we welcome the opportunity to discuss with the Subcommittee the concept of an Act that would cover a broader array of species that would allow us to bring focused assistance on the ground to a wide variety of species, some of which are perilously near extinction. We need to make certain that we prioritize funding based on biological, ecological, and conservation needs, looking at a landscape or ecosystem to see what yields the best conservation benefits and then prioritizing those needs in order to be the most effective with the limited resources available.

### **H.R. 1464, the Great Cats and Rare Canids Conservation Act of 2007 and H.R. 1913, the Great Cats Conservation Act of 2007**

The Administration supports the goals of both the Great Cats and Rare Canids Conservation Act of 2007 (H.R. 1464) and the Great Cats Conservation Act of 2007 (H.R. 1913). As with the other bill discussed in this testimony, we note that there are no funds the President's FY 2008 budget to implement the legislation, and any future funding requests would have to compete with other priority projects for funds.

Wild felids and canids are essential to maintaining the diversity, stability, and integrity of their respective ecosystems. They help to ensure the ecological balance and health of their prey species. Removal of predators can have significant impacts on ecosystem processes and biodiversity. The absence of a top predator, such as a jaguar, may enhance the risk of a cascade of species losses, including plants and animals, throughout the ecosystem. For example, because predators mostly prey on herbivores, their elimination from natural communities may result in an increase of herbivores, which may in turn impact their forage species, thereby degrading habitat and negatively affecting yet other species. Without the natural complement of predators, an ecosystem is unhealthy, potentially unstable, and ultimately compromised.

Felids and canids face many threats throughout their ranges including habitat loss, human-wildlife conflict, illegal hunting/poaching, disease, and decline in prey populations due to over-hunting for bushmeat and competition by livestock for rangeland. Wild felid and canids are particularly vulnerable to these threats as evidenced by the extinctions of the Falkland's wolf and the potential extinction of the Bornean Bay cat. Similarly, dramatic declines of numbers and distributions of animals such as lions, cheetahs, and African wild dogs show that some species, previously considered safe from extinction, are now facing declining populations in many areas. Because some canids and felids have large ranges and extensive movement patterns, they may be more vulnerable to contact and conflict with humans.

Although it is easy for most people to conjure up images of the charismatic large predators of the African savannas such as lions, leopards and cheetahs, the small species of felids and canids are less well understood but equally important in ecological terms. They are frequently nocturnal and are less photographed and studied, but they may have important effects on prey populations such as rodents, which if left unchecked by natural predation, could have devastating effects on crops and human infrastructures.

H.R. 1464 and H.R. 1913 address some of the most urgent conservation issues regarding imperiled species of great cats. H.R. 1464 also addresses these issues for rare canids. All seven of the felid species (cheetah, clouded leopard, Iberian Lynx, jaguar, leopard, lion, snow leopard) and all six of the canid species identified in the bill (African wild dog, bush dog, dhole, Ethiopian wolf, European gray wolf, maned wolf) are listed as endangered or threatened under the ESA, CITES, and/or the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Red List of Endangered Species. H.R. 1464 and H.R. 1913 authorize research, habitat conservation, law enforcement, capacity building and community outreach, and both bills prioritize long-term sustainability of conservation actions related to these species

The Administration has some concerns with both H.R. 1464 and H.R. 1913. Section 5 of H.R. 1464 would permit the Service to use up to 25% of the Act's funding for canid and felid species that meet the criteria for need but are not specifically named in the legislation. While this flexible tool would assist in the conservation of other important but less studied species such as Darwin's Fox, the Andean Cat, the extremely rare Flat-headed Cat, and the nearly extinct Bornean Bay Cat, we are concerned about the specific percentage amount. We would like to discuss with you further whether the percentage amount in the bill is the appropriate one.

As with H.R. 1771, the Administration objects to the language in Section 6 of H.R. 1464 and Section 6 of H.R. 1913 that provides investment authority. In general, the Administration does not support legislative provisions that provide investment authority to fund program activities. Investment authority provides additional funds to a program that would otherwise accrue to the general Treasury, thus limiting the ability of the President and Congress to determine spending based on current priorities and budgets. The Administration strongly opposes the investment authority and recommends it be deleted in both bills.

## **Conclusion**

Our 17-year experience with the Multinational Species Conservation Acts has demonstrated the value of working closely with our international partners to address high-priority conservation issues. These Acts enable the Service to work with our partners to develop long-term, proactive strategies for conservation and management while being able to react quickly and efficiently to emerging issues. In the course of our work with these Acts, we have often been approached to support efforts to conserve species such as cheetahs, African wild dogs and the Amur leopard, which with less than forty left in the wild, is the most endangered large cat in the world.

In closing, the Administration would like to reiterate that we support the goals of H.R. 1464, H.R. 1913 and H.R. 1771, but do have the concerns addressed above. While these concerns are serious, they are not insurmountable. The Administration is interested in working with the Subcommittee to address these issues and others. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions.