

## **Testimony of John G. Robinson, PhD**

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Madame Chairwoman, Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you very much for inviting me to testify again before this Subcommittee. I am Dr. John G. Robinson, Executive Vice President and Chief Conservation Officer with the Wildlife Conservation Society, which was established by visionary conservationists such as Teddy Roosevelt in 1895. With a mission to conserve wild places and wildlife, the Bronx Zoo based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has over its 113 year history, expanded operations into 64 countries. Our mission is to save landscapes and seascapes of global importance, and to conserve wildlife species, and we do so by addressing concerns such as sustainable development and human livelihoods, global climate change, health and well-being and natural resources use and exploitation.

I am here today to testify on H.R. 1454, *Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Act* and H.R. 509, *Marine Turtle Conservation Reauthorization Act*. WCS would like to thank Representative Henry Brown (R-SC), the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee for introducing these pieces of legislation and Chairwoman Bordallo (D-GU) and the Members of the Subcommittee for recognizing the need and urgency expressed in H.R. 1454 and H.R. 509.

### **History and Background of WCS Species Conservation**

The conservation of species has been the focal point of WCS's mission since its inception. Species and species groups are the building blocks of ecosystems and the components of the natural world to which humans most readily relate. We are a trusted global organization that puts science into effective conservation action and the only organization with a global network of field conservation programs and partners, a wide range of curatorial, veterinary and educational expertise, and a complex of urban zoos that maintain, exhibit, breed, rescue and study a wide range of species. WCS works to save some of the world's most charismatic wildlife species across their whole geographic range. Tigers, African and Asian elephants, Great Apes and Marine Turtles have been global priority species for conservation at WCS. These wildlife species receive critical conservation assistance from the Multinational Species Conservation Funds (MSCF) at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and WCS has been pleased to be a partner of the Service in the conservation of these charismatic mega fauna.

Since 1990, the U.S. Congress has provided approximately \$68 million to MSCF, which has leveraged an additional \$140 million in partner contributions, which is the only continuous source of revenue in the world for these wildlife species. Despite the modest size of these programs, their support is very broad-based, including more than 30 diverse organizations representing 20 million members such as WCS, World Wildlife Fund, Safari Club International, Humane Society of United States, Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Feld Entertainment, and others. Partners have included other developed countries, such as Holland, Germany, France, United Kingdom, and the European Union, private corporations like Exxon-Mobil and Disney, conservation organizations such as WCS, and host country agencies. In Congress, MSCF enjoys strong bipartisan support with champions like former Representatives Jim Saxton and Wayne

Gilchrest and former chairs of the House Natural Resources Committee –Representatives Don Young and George Miller. As recently as last month, the House passed two bills to create new species funds for rare cats and canids and endangered cranes with more than 290 Members of Congress voting in favor of passage on both bills. Together with the Wildlife Without Borders regional and global programs, FWS managed MSCF helps strengthen local wildlife management capabilities and contribute to domestic stability by protecting natural resources and providing local employment. The need for conservation assistance is significant and MSCF affords conservationists such as those at WCS to accomplish amazing successes with modest support around the world.

### African Elephant Conservation Fund

The *African Elephant Status Report 2007*, published by the IUCN African Elephant Specialist Group, states that reliable estimates for the species are only available from 51% of this species range. Dramatic decline in African elephant numbers from about 1.2 million to 600,000 in the 1980s was halted by vigorous conservation action, including the ivory trade ban. Numbers over the last few decades have been more stable, with probable increases in population numbers in the savannas and woodlands of east and southern Africa in the past decade. But recently, an increase in hunting for ivory trade and for bushmeat is affecting elephant populations in many parts of Africa, leading to declines in the rarer forest sub-species in the forests of West and Central Africa: numbers for these areas suggest that perhaps as few as 100,000 individuals remain.

Elephant poaching continues throughout the Congo Basin, including in protected areas, despite the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) resolutions controlling ivory trading. Elephants in Zakouma National Park in Chad, the last stronghold for the savanna elephants of Central Africa's Sahel region, now hover at less than 1,000 animals, down from an estimated 3,000 in 2006. Despite this sobering news, WCS has continued to use the support provided by FWS to implement innovative conservation strategies to ensure African elephant populations are conserved and their numbers rebound in their natural habitat. For example, in 2007, WCS undertook an aerial survey of Southern Sudan with modest support from the African Elephant Conservation Funds which revealed more than 1.3 million African antelope of three species white-eared kob, tiang, and mongalla gazelle, and included an estimated 8,000 elephants seen thundering across the landscape of Southern Sudan. The discovery of this large migration, which rivals the Serengeti, has provided new hope to this region. WCS is working with the Government of Southern Sudan to create the nation's first network of wildlife parks which has the potential to generate revenue from ecotourism, wildlife photography and other revenue generating operations.

### Asian Elephant Conservation Fund

Estimates of Asian elephants range from 30,000 to 50,000, fully half of which are found in India. But these estimates are undermined by a severe deficit of systematically collected data. FWS has supported several WCS surveys in South and Southeast Asia which has confirmed a range collapse across Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, China, and much of Laos and Cambodia, populations have declined to the point of near extinction. In Southeast Asia, habitat loss and hunting continue to threaten fragmented populations. In Africa and Asia, WCS has worked as the key NGO partner, and a strong scientific advisor, to the CITES program on the Monitoring of

Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE). Through the MIKE process, WCS has helped developed state of the art and harmonious methods that are applied across study areas to produce data that can be analyzed and compared in aggregate. While there remains a need for better information, the work, and the key support of the MSCF Program, has been invaluable. Recently, new data released in January 2008 by WCS and Malaysia's Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) brings additional hope for Asian elephants. The surveys have revealed that a population of endangered Asian elephants living in a Malaysian park may be the largest in Southeast Asia. WCS and DWNP researchers estimate that there are 631 Asian elephants living in Taman Negara National Park – a 1,676 square mile protected area in the center of Peninsular Malaysia. In response to this discovery the Government of Malaysia is working to undertake similar elephant surveys in the other regions and to develop a holistic elephant plan for the country. As a part of this holistic elephant plan FWS is now funding WCS to work with the Government of Malaysia to protect the elephants of Malaysia from poaching and habitat loss, and to find ways to reduce human-elephant conflict, a prominent conservation and human livelihood concern.

### Rhino-Tiger Conservation Fund

Tigers now occupy approximately 7% of their historical range, and in the past decade estimates of area occupied by tigers has dropped by as much as 41%. India remains a stronghold for tigers, and strong U.S. Government support in the past has been critical in shoring up tiger and prey populations. Support to WCS has assisted us in increasing the numbers of tigers in critical reserves in the southern Indian State of Karnataka, and provided some of the best data on the distribution and abundance of tigers, and their prey, in India. But episodes of poaching – fueled by trade to Tibet and China – have resulted in decline and local extinction of some populations in India, famously in the Sariska reserve in Rajasthan. A decade of surveys by WCS, and colleagues in many range state governments, have shown rapid range contraction in Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, and Thailand. In India, WCS has begun using modern technologies to rapidly identify individual tigers by creating 3-D models via photos taken from remote cameras. These technologies also help pinpoint the origin of tigers from confiscated skins. Nearly 300 of India's tigers are thriving in the Western Ghats today. In both the Russian Far East, and in regions of the Western Ghats of India, FWS support has helped maintain stable tiger populations during the last decade. Regular high-quality protection of both the tigers themselves and their prey has been vital to this conservation success.

All five species of rhinoceros are under siege. The Javan and Sumatran species of rhino are critically endangered and their numbers continue to dwindle. In Africa, numbers of the formerly numerous black rhino have declined from perhaps 65,000 in 1970 to about 3,500 today, and the species has been extirpated over large areas of Africa. While the species has begun to rebound in some places, like Kenya, due to effective conservation efforts, one of the four sub-species, the West African Black Rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis longipes*), was declared to be extinct by the IUCN in 2006. The news is better for the white rhino and the Indian rhino, whose numbers have increased substantially during this century, but even for these species the total world populations are only in the low thousands, and their continued survival is not guaranteed. And while the white rhino is doing well in southern Africa, the northern sub-species, *Ceratotherium simum cottoni*, is critically endangered and on the verge of extinction.

### Great Apes Conservation Fund

All four species of great apes –gorillas, orangutans, bonobos and chimpanzees are in desperate trouble in the wild and WCS works to conserve all of these species in their respective habitat. The threats to the apes stem largely from increased commercial logging that facilitates both habitat loss and a growing and largely unregulated commercial bushmeat trade. Not only is this commercial trade being used to supply urban populations in Africa, international trade is occurring at a rapid pace. This has catastrophic effects on human and wildlife health, given that nearly 60 percent of the known 1400 infectious diseases are zoonotic –that transfer from wildlife to livestock and humans. Both humans and great apes have been found to be highly susceptible to a wide range of diseases, including anthrax, measles, influenza, tuberculosis and Ebola hemorrhagic fever. As recently as 2005, the disappearance of an estimated 5,000 gorillas in northern Congo has been linked to these zoonotic diseases. Despite these harsh realities, there is much to be proud of because of the investments made by the U.S. Government in great ape conservation.

For example, WCS recently conducted field surveys resulting in the discovery of 125,000 critically endangered western lowland gorillas in the Northern Congo. This effort not only provides hope to the global great ape populations but has encouraged the Government of Congo to provide increased protection to this gentle giant of Africa. Highly lethal Ebola virus (EBOV) seriously threatens not only people but populations of gorillas, chimpanzees and other African apes. Throughout Congo, WCS is working to better understand and combat the spread of Ebola and other emerging diseases. More than 40 local researchers and government staff in northern Congo have been trained on early mortality reporting. These activities serve as an early-warning system for potential outbreaks, helping to protect both ape and human populations. In Asia, WCS recently counted 2500 yellow-cheeked crested gibbons in Cambodia's Seima Biodiversity Conservation Area –a 300 square mile area and the world's largest known populations of the species. Hunting and habitat loss as a result of extensive logging has threatened these ape populations. FWS support has helped establish this Biodiversity Conservation Area in part and supported other programs in the Northern Plains. As a result, the populations of the gibbons and other highly endangered species of Seima such as Douc's Langur and Green Peafowl have also recovered.

Besides the Great Apes Conservation Fund, I would like to acknowledge the support provided by the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) and Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE) as a result of which several of Africa's great ape populations have received assistance from the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Service for International Development and the U.S. Forest Service –International Program.

#### Marine Turtle Conservation Fund (MTCF)

Marine turtles are truly the ancient mariners of the world's oceans with ancestors dating back over 100 million years. Marine turtles have a complex life-history. They are long-lived and generally late to reproduce, and while the average adult female may lay hundreds of eggs in a single season, only one turtle hatchling from one thousand eggs laid is estimated to survive the decades required to reach reproductive age. In addition, marine turtles move across national boundaries and in many instances across ocean basins, and use different habitats at different stages of their lives.

There are approximately 325 species of turtles worldwide of which seven species live in the oceans. While all sea turtle species require tropical, subtropical or temperate oceanic beaches for nesting, each has specific marine habitat and feeding requirements. Six of the seven marine turtles species are listed in threatened categories by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and included in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES): green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), the leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), the loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), the hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), the Kemp's ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*), and the olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*). The flatback turtle (*Natator depressus*), which occurs in the near shore and inshore waters of Australia, is listed as data deficient. Once abundant around the world, marine turtles today have been in serious trouble as a result of human exploitation, commercial trade and habitat loss over the last few decades. Other threats to marine turtles include over-exploitation in both legal and illegal fisheries; loss of egg-laying females to legal and illegal slaughter and legal and illegal collection of turtle eggs on nesting beaches; incidental capture and mortality in fishing gear, including pelagic longlines and coastal gillnets and others factors. The impact of these threats is exacerbated in many places by a lack of science-based management and concerted conservation effort. Looming ahead as an additional threat is climate change, which can affect turtles in numerous ways – through increased storms that destroy nesting beaches and nests, increased temperatures that may affect the survivability of eggs, and impacts on food sources as a result of climate-induced changes in the marine environment.

Since 2005, the MTCF has distributed \$2.3 million to conservation groups globally which has generated an additional \$3.7 million in partner contributions and private donations. FWS has supported projects ranging from supporting community based conservation programs in Vietnam to ranger training and capacity building for the Oman Ministry of Environment's marine turtle conservation program. WCS is pleased to have received support from FWS to conduct critical turtle conservation efforts. For example, in Nicaragua, the region's sea turtle populations greatly depend on the actions of natural resource users and managers in Nicaragua that have caused hawksbill and other species populations to decline rapidly due to heavy poaching and consumption. FWS support has in part helped WCS to reverse the declining trend in hawksbills in the Pearl Cays, Nicaragua. Local residents patrol nesting beaches daily have reduced poaching from almost 100% to less than 5% in recent years resulting in more clutches being laid from the increased survival of nesting females. Post-nesting hawksbills have been equipped with satellite transmitters that track the long distances the turtles traverse during their migrations, allowing researchers to use information on sea turtle long range movements to educate local Nicaraguans about sea turtles and their conservation needs.

New research has shown that Gabon is home to the largest leatherback nesting population in the world and has the highest nesting density in Africa. Despite positive news on population numbers and a commitment from the Gabonese Government to protect nesting sea turtles through the establishment of coastal national parks, Gabon's leatherbacks and other sea turtle species including green turtles, hawksbills and olive ridleys continue to be threatened by poaching, commercial fishery bycatch, intentional capture, and habitat disturbance and degradation. With FWS support WCS established the Gabon Sea Turtle Partnership in 2005. The Partnership is a consortium representing the joint energy, expertise, and initiatives of all the NGOs, institutions, government authorities and individuals involved in Gabon's sea turtle

research and conservation efforts. This Partnership has made critical progress, including supporting regular beach and nest surveillance in all areas of high nest density, effective threat mitigation, and rural and urban environmental education programs.

## **PART A: Recommendations to H.R. 1454, Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Act**

WCS is supportive of H.R. 1454 in its efforts to create significant supplemental funding mechanisms to the annual appropriations for the MSCF Program. While MSCFs have made targeted investments in species conservation supporting more than 1500 conservation projects so far, the Service has been unable to support an additional 1300 meritorious projects that would have contributed directly to the conservation of these species. Given the modest levels of funding which it has received to date. H.R. 1454, *Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Act* directs the U.S. Postal Service to issue a semipostal stamp at a premium price depicting highly imperiled African and Asian elephants, Rhinoceros, Tigers, Great Apes and Marine turtles.

We should conserve wildlife species because they are integral to the functioning of the ecological systems upon which we all depend, they are prized across most cultures, and they are critical to many of the economic relationships that link people with nature. Species are threatened by deforestation, habitat loss, over hunting and fishing, emerging diseases, and the dislocations wrought by climate change. Many of the most critically threatened species are found in the developing countries of Africa, Asia, South America and seascapes in between that are grappling with overpopulation, poverty, and overdependence on natural resources.

Semipostal stamps have been successful to raise support for worthy causes such as breast cancer research, to fund domestic violence prevention programs and to assist the families of rescue workers and other victims of September 11, 2001. The sale proceeds of the MSCF semipostal stamps are tough to estimate. Since 1998, 802 million breast cancer stamps have been sold to the public and has raised a remarkable \$59.5 million for critical breast cancer research. This provides us an indication of the American people's support to worthy causes. Creating this new funding mechanism does not only have the potential to raise millions of dollars to save these imperiled species but also augments the health of ecosystems that sustain both humans and wildlife. This builds on the historic public and private investment in conservation, a hallmark of the MSCF program, without any additional burden to the U.S. taxpayer.

### **Specific Recommendations**

The Multinational Species Conservation Fund Program demonstrates this nation's compassion and stewardship for the other species with whom we share this world, and is one of America's front line tools in combating ecological degradation. H.R. 1454 will reinforce that vision of conserving our revered natural resources for the benefit of wildlife and our future generations. We include a few recommended modifications to ensure that the foresight and flexibility of this new funding stream is in alignment with the growth of the MSCF program.

Making future MSCF Species Programs eligible: H.R. 1454 makes the existing MSCF Programs for African and Asian elephants, rhinos and tigers, great apes and marine turtles eligible to

benefit from an equal distribution of the sale proceeds of the semi-postal stamps. Other future species funds, beginning with the Great Cats and Rare Canids Act and the Crane Conservation Act would require amending H.R. 1454 to ensure their eligibility for funding derived from the sale of MSCF semipostal stamps. Both these bills recently passed the U.S. House of Representatives with overwhelming bi-partisan support. WCS recommends that H.R. 1454 include a provision to ensure future MSCF programs will also benefit from any creative funding streams that would augment annual appropriations.

**Making existing and future Wildlife Without Borders Regional and Global Programs eligible:**

The Wildlife Without Borders program provides critical assistance to species and habitat that do not directly benefit from the MSCF Programs. The Wildlife Without Borders programs works in partnership beyond formal treaties and agreements to address cross-cutting threats such as emerging wildlife diseases, climate change, invasive species, wildlife trade, and human-wildlife conflict. Programs in Mexico, Latin America and Caribbean, Africa, Russia and India are currently under-funded and a provision to support these programs through the MSCF semi-postal stamp sales is recommended.

**Value of MSCF Programs:** H.R. 1454 does not include a description of the MSCF Programs and the successes of the critical conservation assistance it provides. WCS recommends that this information along with the MSCF history, leverage potential and its main successes over the years be included in the Findings Section of the bill.

**PART B: Recommendations to H.R. 509, Marine Turtle Conservation Reauthorization Act**

WCS is supportive of H.R. 509 in its effort to reinforce America's commitment to global marine conservation. As mentioned above, marine turtle populations around the world are severely depleted and declining in number. They face numerous threats that are difficult to mitigate and in many instances compound each other. The successes of the past five years of implementation of the MTCF have demonstrated that these threats are not only intractable but that it is a sustained effort that enables them to be overcome. Because of the immense challenges facing marine turtles, the resources available to date have not been sufficient to cope with the continued loss of nesting habitat due to human activities and the resulting diminution of marine turtle populations. Since 2005, FWS has received nearly 300 MTCF grant applications but modest funding for the program has enable the Service to only support 78 worthy proposals to date. The reauthorization of the MTCA affords Congress the opportunity to reevaluate the status of the world's turtles and consider supporting not just those that live in the ocean but also the world's depleting freshwater turtle and tortoise populations. H.R. 509 with a few recommended modifications, would ensure sustained support and flexibility to conserving our revered marine wildlife.

**Specific Recommendations**

**Strengthening MTCF through Support for Foraging Populations and Science-based Management**

WCS strongly recommends the reauthorization of H.R. 509 *Marine Turtle Conservation Reauthorization Act*. Numerous studies over many years, including most recently through satellite-tagging of individual turtles, have documented the movement of turtles from nesting beaches in countries where they are protected to foraging areas in other countries where they spend months and sometimes years. In these areas, they are often subject to legal turtle fisheries

either directly targeting turtles or as incidental take for other fisheries. There is a pressing need for greater investment in conservation and management efforts for marine turtles in these foraging areas to ensure that they are not overfished or not subject to accidental bycatch. Therefore, WCS recommends expanded investment to support marine turtles in their foraging grounds in addition to funding efforts in nesting beaches.

#### Promoting Regional and Global Cooperation through Marine Turtle Conservation

FWS currently supports sea turtle conservation globally which helps foster regional and international cooperation, sharing of science-based information and resources and enhances collaborations. In Gabon and other African nations, the Gabon Sea Turtle Partnership mentioned previously has developed international coordination with neighboring countries and collaboration with scientific experts. Similar regional efforts, with input from local communities and other stakeholders, have been strengthened by WCS's efforts to conserve green turtles foraging in the Miskito Banks of Nicaragua. To this end, WCS recommends that H.R. 509 provide increased capacity to FWS to fund projects that promote bilateral and regional cooperation in the management and conservation of shared marine turtle stocks.

Expanding the Scope of MTCF to Freshwater Turtles and Tortoises: Like marine turtles, tortoises and freshwater turtles are long-lived species that mature late in life and are especially vulnerable to exploitation. Today their respective habitat is being increasingly fragmented, polluted or destroyed. Of about 318 species of freshwater turtles and tortoises, 168 have thus far been assessed as threatened with extinction and are listed on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Of the estimated 90 species in Asia, more than 50 % are considered to be either critically endangered or endangered according to the IUCN. An overwhelming number of freshwater turtles and tortoises are collected, traded in the illegal pet trade; and killed, and consumed as food and in traditional medicine --this is happening at an unsustainable rate. Some species of freshwater turtles and tortoises are down to their last few individuals and stopgap measures, including captive breeding, are underway to prevent their extinction. Together with the China Zoo Society, Changsha and Suzhou Zoos, WCS is helping with captive breeding techniques to save the Yangtze giant soft-shell, (*Rafetus swinhoei*) –the last chance of survival for the world's largest freshwater turtle. Once ranging through southern China and northern Vietnam, the population of this species is down to four individuals mainly due to pollution, hunting and human development.

WCS recommends that H.R. 509 expand the eligible species funded by MTCF to include threatened freshwater turtles and tortoises while ensuring such an expansion does not diminish the modest level of funds allocated to marine turtles. To this end, WCS recommends that the Purpose Section of this legislation includes continued financial assistance to marine turtles and allocate up to 20 percent of the annual appropriations for MTCF in excess of \$1,000,000 to be used for grants to assist the conservation of threatened freshwater turtles and tortoises. The Definitions Section of the bill should include an explanation of freshwater turtles and tortoises to clarify the scope of additional species eligible for funding through MTCF.

Ensuring MTCF is Funded Commensurate with Authorization Levels: Funding this program has been a sound investment in conservation and has strengthened America's bilateral and multilateral relationships with the countries and regions these iconic marine turtles call home. WCS recommends increased funding for the MTCF commensurate with its \$ 5,000,000 annual



authorization level with flexibility to FWS to fund conservation activities, including but not limited to, research, monitoring, planning, training, conservation education and on-the-ground implementation of conservation action. To this end, WCS urges Congress to support FWS's efforts to develop new projects using successful models previously funded by MTCF that either broaden the range of conservation activities such as captive breeding of critical endangered species and/or address threats to a particular population not being currently addressed with MTCF funds.

In conclusion, congressional authorization for H.R. 1454, *Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Act* and H.R. 509 *Marine Turtle Conservation Act* will reaffirm the leadership of the U.S. Government within the international community, underscoring our commitment to our international treaty obligations, and encouraging coordinated international efforts to save the world's depleting charismatic mega fauna. The very survival of species like elephants, rhinoceros, tigers, great apes and marine turtles rests in the hands of our generation. Given the enormity of this responsibility, and the urgency of the need for increased conservation, WCS urges the Subcommittee and the Congress as a whole to act quickly and positively on the authorization of these critical pieces of legislation. Thank you again for the opportunity to comment and to work with you on these bills.