

Testimony of
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before the
Vermont House Fish, Wildlife and Water Resources Committee
in support of H. 297

April 8, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the plight of African elephants due to demand for ivory and the important role of H. 297 to improve their conservation status in the wild.

My organization, WCS, saves wildlife and wild places worldwide through science, conservation action, education, and inspiring people to value nature. To achieve our mission, we harness the power of our Global Conservation Program in nearly 60 countries and the world's oceans, and in our five New York City-based wildlife parks, including our Bronx Zoo headquarters. WCS combines its expertise in the field, zoos, and aquarium to achieve its conservation mission.

The African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) is the largest land animal extant in the world today, and a critical part of our natural heritage. African elephants also act as ecosystem engineers, opening pathways through the landscape, maintaining mineral-rich clearings on which gorillas and many other species depend, and maintaining the diversity of the plant community by their browsing and seed dispersal activities. In addition, they are a major part of the tourist draw to many countries in Africa, so are important for local economies and jobs.

Yet African elephants are being killed illegally at an enormous rate for their ivory. All international commercial trade in ivory has been illegal since 1989, when the African elephant was transferred from Appendix II to Appendix I under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). African elephants are also protected in the U.S. under the Endangered Species Act and the African Elephant Conservation Act.

Following the 1989 CITES ban, illegal killing of elephants declined and populations started to recover. In recent years, however, illegal killing and ivory trade have increased dramatically. The rise in disposable income in East Asia, coupled with increasing economic and transportation links between Africa and Asia, have been implicated in the rapid recent increases in illegal elephant killing and smuggling of ivory, becoming especially pronounced from 2007 onwards. Illegal ivory trade and the weight of ivory being traded globally has more than doubled since 2007, and is more than three times greater than it was in 1998. In 2012, some 35,000 African elephants were killed, an average of 96 elephants per day, representing the worst mass slaughter of elephants in any year since the 1989 international ban. African forest elephants (*L. a. cyclotis*) in particular have been devastated by poaching and have declined by about 65 percent since 2002. At this rate, African forest elephants could effectively be extinct over the next 10 to 15 years. Large populations of African savannah elephants (*L. a. africana*) formerly thought to be relatively secure are now also experiencing alarming declines. The elephant population in the

Selous, Tanzania, numbered around 39,000 animals in 2009, and only 13,084 by 2013 – a loss of 66% in four years.

As one of the world's most lucrative criminal activities, the illegal wildlife trade ranks fourth globally in terms of value, behind the trafficking in drugs, people, and arms. Increasing consumer demand for and markets in carved or worked ivory, particularly in Asia, but also in other parts of the world including the U.S., are causing the price of ivory to skyrocket, thereby driving the illegal trade in elephant ivory and the mass killings of elephants in Africa. Today's ivory traffickers are primarily well-organized syndicates that operate as transnational criminal networks and often participate in other illegal activities, including trafficking in narcotics and weapons, and some have links with terrorist networks.

A major challenge to halting the ivory trade and thereby the slaughter of elephants is the lack of effective law enforcement controls along the trade chain from Africa, through the transit countries, and to the end consumer markets. This challenge is compounded by the high levels of corruption at many points in the trade chain. Given the involvement of criminal enterprises along the whole commodity chain, from elephant range countries to the main ivory consumer countries, corruption enables the laundering of illegal ivory into legal or potentially legal markets. Furthermore, only 10% of illegal ivory is seized at a country's borders and once it is inside those borders, it becomes nearly impossible to distinguish from legal ivory, especially worked ivory such as jewelry and trinkets which comprise a significant portion of the illegal ivory trade. In addition, it is extremely difficult for consumers, sellers and often law enforcement officials to visually distinguish elephant ivory from other species of ivory such as mammoth. CITES only regulates international trade—it is up to individual countries to control their domestic markets in protected species.

Among many others, Africa's leaders recognize this, and several have appealed to the world's ivory consuming nations to work together with them to help save their elephants. As part of a Clinton Global Initiative commitment to save Africa's elephants, since September 2013, the leaders of 14 countries—Botswana, Burkina Faso, Côte D'Ivoire, Gabon, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda, U.S., Vietnam, and Zambia —have come together to call upon governments around the world to join them in halting the ivory trade by implementing domestic moratoria on all imports, exports and domestic sales and purchases of all elephant ivory and ivory products.

While the new U.S. federal ivory ban makes it illegal to import, export and trade ivory between states with only a few exceptions, the need for state level bans remains to stop the trade at the point of retail sale within states. Last year, New York and New Jersey passed strong ivory bans and several other states are pursuing similar bans this year.

Through H. 297, Vermont has the opportunity to help shut down this illegal trade locally and lead the way during this critical time for elephants. Other key consumer countries are watching closely. Action needs to be taken now if we hope to save elephants for future generations.