

**Animal Welfare Institute Testimony in Support of HB 52,
A Bill to Restrict Wildlife Trafficking
Maryland House Environment and Transportation Committee
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Dear Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein, and honorable members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee:

On behalf of the Animal Welfare Institute, a national nonprofit animal advocacy organization, and our Maryland members, I want to express our support for HB 52 to restrict the sale of parts and products from elephants, rhinos, tigers, giraffes, sea turtles, and other imperiled species. This bill would neither criminalize possession of items currently owned by Maryland residents, nor impede noncommercial transfer of those products. Rather, it would place commonsense limits on sales of these parts and products, thereby aiding in the preservation of these majestic species.

Current circumstances of the wildlife trade

Elephants

Worldwide illegal ivory trade has more than doubled since 2007 and tripled since 1998, resulting in the decimation of some African elephant populations. As of 2021, the global trade in ivory was worth about \$23 billion annually. A comprehensive survey of Africa's savanna elephants found that their numbers declined by 30 percent between 2007 and 2014, with the rate of decline accelerating over those seven years. As of 2016, there were approximately 400,000 savanna elephants remaining, down from an estimated 3 million in the early 19th century, and the vast majority of this decline is attributable to poaching. As a result, certain populations of African elephants are vulnerable to extinction and may not withstand these poaching thresholds much longer.

The inclusion of mammoth and mastodon in HB 52 is also vital for addressing the elephant poaching crisis. Without specialized training, mastodon and mammoth ivories are difficult to distinguish from those of elephants, which enables sellers to skirt trade restrictions and continue selling the latter under the guise of the former, duping unsuspecting customers into purchasing illicit products. Furthermore, alternatives like mammoth and mastodon ivory simply fuel desire for elephant ivory, normalize its consumption, and keep the ivory market alive.

Rhinoceroses

All five extant rhinoceros species are in tremendous danger due to the demand for their horns. The horns, made of a substance akin to human fingernails, are used in Traditional Asian Medicine to allegedly cure a variety of ailments including cancer, despite conclusive evidence that they have no

curative properties. Black rhinos populations in Africa, for instance, were decimated by poaching, declining 96% over 20 years – from around 70,000 individuals in 1970 to just 2,410 in 1995. Their population is now over 5,000 thanks to conservation efforts. South Africa, which is home to the majority of African rhinos, has seen a staggering increase in poaching numbers in recent years – from a just handful in 2007 to a peak of 1,349 killed in 2015. The dwindling rhino numbers cannot sustain ongoing poaching at this level.

Tigers

Despite a slow recent rise in population numbers, tigers continue to be endangered, with fewer than 4,000 tigers left in the wild. Juvenile mortality rates are high, and about half of all cubs do not survive past two years of age. Tigers have lost roughly 95 percent of their range, further intensifying their conflicts with humans over livestock and space. Poaching is another threat facing tigers, as their pelts are valuable on the black market and virtually all of their parts are used in various traditional medicines and remedies.

Lions

Lions are currently listed as vulnerable across most of their range by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and listed as critically endangered in West Africa. There are an estimated 20,000 left in the wild, according to a survey conducted in 2020. Habitat loss and an unsustainable bushmeat trade in large herbivores has led to a decrease in available prey, causing an increase in human-lion conflict over domesticated animals. Because of this, lions are relentlessly persecuted across Africa and are frequently killed as “problem animals.” Like tigers, lion bones and body parts are frequently illegally traded for use in traditional medicines.

Leopards

Critically endangered amur leopards have seen their last viable population shrink to an estimated 84 individuals as of 2017. They are in dire risk of extinction due primarily to being poached for their spotted fur. Meanwhile, the snow leopard has an estimated population of 3,500-7,000. They are killed by farmers for preying on livestock due to a decrease in wild prey, and they are also threatened by habitat fragmentation. Their fur, bones, and other body parts are illegally traded.

Cheetahs

Cheetah populations are in danger due to habitat loss, declines in prey, and conflicts with humans. Additionally, there is a high demand for cheetahs as pets. They are illegally captured then smuggled around the world, and only one in six cubs survives this process. Their numbers have steadily declined from tens of thousands historically to 15,000 in 1975 to fewer than 8,000 today. Humans have altered more than 90 percent of the cheetah's original habitat and they are extinct in Asia except for a small population in Iran.

Jaguars

Habitat loss and fragmentation, conflict with humans, and poaching have severely impacted jaguar populations. They have been eradicated from 40 percent of their historic range and are extinct in

Uruguay and El Salvador. Jaguars are often killed for their spotted coats, and there is also illegal demand for jaguar paws, teeth, and other products.

Sea Turtles

Six species of sea turtle are classified as vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered on the IUCN Red List due to entanglement in fishing gear, coastal development that interferes with egg-laying, plastic and other pollution, climate change, and poaching and illegal trade of their eggs, meat, and shells. Hawksbill sea turtle shells are in demand due to their beautiful gold and brown coloring, which can be used to create jewelry and other luxury items. As a result, these turtles have declined by 90 percent over the past 100 years and are now listed as critically endangered.

Pangolins

Pangolins are mammals covered in hard scales who are found in Africa and Asia. There are eight extant species: Chinese pangolin, Indian pangolin, Sunda pangolin, Philippine pangolin, tree pangolin, long-tailed pangolin, giant pangolin, and Temminck's ground pangolin. They are poached and illegally traded for their meat and their scales, which are used as ingredients in traditional Asian medicine despite being made only of keratin. More than half a million pangolins have been poached since 2016, making them the most illegally trafficked mammals in the world. Pangolin populations are in severe decline and are thought to be locally extirpated in parts of both Asia and Africa.

Sharks and Rays

There are at least 1,000 shark and ray species, and a 2014 IUCN study found that a quarter are threatened with extinction. An estimated 100 million sharks are killed by fisheries every year, for their fins (used to make an expensive Asian soup), for their meat, and by accidental entanglement in fishing gear. Meanwhile, rays are targeted for their meat and for their gill plates. Because they reproduce at a slow rate, sharks and rays are highly susceptible to overexploitation.

Giraffes

Giraffe numbers in Africa have plummeted 30 percent over the last 30 years, and there are only an estimated 111,000 giraffes remaining. In some areas of prime giraffe habitat, numbers have dropped by 95% in the same period. Three of the nine giraffe subspecies are now listed as Endangered or Critically Endangered by IUCN. The causes of this decline include habitat and fragmentation, overhunting (including for trophies), and poaching.

Hippopotamuses

The IUCN classifies hippopotamuses as vulnerable to extinction, and estimates that between 125,000 and 148,000 remain in the wild. Hippo numbers dropped during the late 1990s and early 2000s; studies found that hippo populations in the Democratic Republic of Congo declined more than 95 percent during this period as a result of intense hunting pressure. Hippos continue to face threats from habitat loss and degradation, and illegal or unregulated hunting for meat and ivory (which is found in the canine teeth).

Bonobos

There are an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 bonobos left in the wild, although an exact number is difficult to determine due to the remoteness of their habitat and local political unrest, and bonobos are classified as endangered by the IUCN. Bonobos are hunted for bushmeat, the exotic pet trade, and use in traditional medicine. Other threats include disruption from civil warfare in their range states and habitat degradation.

Chimpanzees

At the beginning of the 20th century it is estimated that there were approximately 1 million chimpanzees in the wild, but that number is down to 172,000-300,000 today. They are extinct in four of their 25 range countries in Africa. The threats facing chimpanzees include habitat loss, commercial bushmeat hunting, exotic pet trade, disease, and armed conflict in range states.

Orangutans

All three species of orangutan (Sumatran, Bornean, and Tapanuli) are listed as critically endangered by the IUCN, with an estimated total of 55,000 to 65,000 individuals in the wild. The threats to this species include loss of habitat through deforestation and palm oil plantations, as well as illegal capture for the exotic pet trade. Orangutans are also killed for bushmeat, for traditional medicine products, and so their parts can be sold as souvenirs.

Gorillas

Both Western gorillas, who live in West Africa, and Eastern gorillas, who live in central Africa, are listed as critically endangered by the IUCN. Mountain gorillas, a subspecies of Eastern gorilla, are particularly imperiled, with approximately 1,000 individuals left in the wild. The threats faced by gorillas include poaching, habitat encroachment, armed conflict in range states, and disease.

Poaching for the illegal wildlife trade is a brutal, bloody practice. Animals are shot with military-grade weapons, and tusks, horns, and other parts are harvested by mutilating the sometimes still-living animals. Tight-knit herds of social species are torn apart and babies are orphaned or even killed. The casualties are not limited to animals; more African park rangers are being killed in the line of duty than ever before, most often via ambush. On average, more than 100 rangers are killed each year because they stand between the animals and the poachers.

The harsh reality of the international wildlife trade is that there are, even as we speak, poachers slaughtering imperiled wildlife – and that some of these illegal wildlife products could ultimately end up in the Maryland marketplace masquerading as legal items.

The global poaching crisis undermines our national security

The illegal wildlife trade has implications for more than just the preservation of species. Poaching is not a small or unsophisticated operation; rather, it is intertwined with violent militias, organized crime, and government corruption. Wildlife trafficking now produces profits of upwards of \$20 billion a year,

placing it among the top five criminal markets (alongside narcotics, human trafficking, weapons, and counterfeiting). These groups use poaching as a substantial source of funding, and employ the logistics and supply chains of major container and shipping companies to move their product in a system interwoven with the networks that also enable terrorism, drugs, weapons, and human trafficking.

Several insurgent groups undermining the rule of law are either directly involved in poaching or trafficking, or are likely sharing some of the same facilitators, such as corrupt customs and border officials, money launderers, and supply chains. For instance, the Lord's Resistance Army, an extremist rebel group originally from Uganda, took part in elephant poaching operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo beginning in 2012. Al Shabaab, an Islamist insurgent group based in Somalia that has made direct threats to the U.S., has acted as middlemen in the transit of elephant ivory from Africa to Asia.

This crisis has reached such a scale that these criminal groups are a concern for the stability of some African governments. Well-funded terrorist organizations operating in developing countries can take advantage of governments that lack the capacity to regulate their country's natural assets. A region destabilized by corruption and violent conflict is not only problematic for the nations involved, but also for US security.

At the federal level, there has been broad bipartisan recognition of the risk that wildlife trafficking poses to our nation's safety. President Obama issued an executive order in 2013 that identified wildlife trafficking as a security threat, and subsequently released a National Strategy for Combatting Wildlife Trafficking in 2014. Presidents Trump and Biden both issued executive orders on transnational crime that recognized the ties between wildlife trafficking and organized criminal networks. Congress has acted as well by passing the Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt (END) Wildlife Trafficking Act in 2016 to enhance national security by providing the federal government with additional tools to curb illicit wildlife trade.

Why is this bill needed in Maryland?

State bills such as HB 52 are necessary to complement federal measures and ensure that commerce in wildlife products is tightly regulated throughout US markets. Any legal market creates an opportunity for illegal products to be laundered as their legal counterparts. These bans are particularly crucial in coastal states like Maryland, due to the potential for illegal wildlife products to enter through the ports.

HB 52 would establish Maryland as a leader in the fight against wildlife trafficking, alongside twelve other states (California, Illinois, Hawaii, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington) plus the District of Columbia that have enacted laws to restrict or ban the sale of certain wildlife products within their borders.

The Animal Welfare Institute urges the House Environment and Transportation Committee to aid in the conservation of imperiled species by passing HB 52, and welcomes any questions about this testimony.

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