

Testimony of Dr. Jimmiel Mandima
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International Conservation Caucus Hearing:
“Wildlife Trade, Origins of COVID-19, and Preventing Future Pandemics”
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Biography: IFAW’s Deputy Vice President of Conservation. More than 25 years of experience doing applied research, and leading landscape conservation in sub-Saharan Africa working with border region communities, governments and regional initiatives to promote transboundary, landscape level integrated planning and solutions e.g. involvement in the genesis of what has become the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) and other TFCAs

International Conservation Caucus Co-Chairs and Members of Congress, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony today on “The links between the commercial trade and consumption of wildlife and disease outbreaks like COVID-19, SARS, HIV, and Ebola, and to consider steps the United States can take to prevent future pandemics.” As the world faces the continuing crisis caused by COVID-19, this is a critical conversation. Even as we address the daily challenges of this new disease, it is incumbent upon us to address the causes of this novel coronavirus and examine ways that we can work together to protect against future zoonotic pandemics.

In this testimony I will focus on the important role of law enforcement in protecting against future pandemics. However, I want to stress that COVID-19 and other major illnesses that have spilled over from wildlife populations – among them HIV, Ebola, SARS, MERs, and monkeypox – have been triggered by imbalances in ecosystem health which are largely driven by human development and consumption habits that have resulted in increasing wildlife trade and decreasing wild spaces. These drivers need to be addressed holistically through cross-sectoral integrated planning and coordinated solutions that use the One Health approach in order to avoid future pandemics.

Immediate Impacts of COVID-19 on Wildlife Crime

Data are still being gathered on the effects of COVID-19 in conservation areas around the world. However, we know that the closure of tourism means fewer people are around to scare off poachers, which could lead to a rise in poaching activities. Work stoppage, loss of jobs and closure of the informal trade sector also means people may have to subsist through illegal

offtake. Furthermore, recurrent extreme weather events in sub-Saharan Africa have rendered agriculture unproductive.

There is incredible will in communities on the ground to continue to conserve wildlife and habitats even in the face of overwhelming stressors. Rangers are under tremendous stress, many are working far away from their families and have concerns for their safety. IFAW is seeing collaboration across public and private sectors, and we have reports that some parks are upping activity in deploying rangers to prevent more wildlife crime in the absence of tourism.

However, with as much as 99% of tourism revenue lost for the foreseeable future, we will see conservation successes lost unless we can provide short term stimulus or emergency funding that allows communities to survive without reverting to illegal or counterproductive activities. For instance, snaring has increased in areas like Victoria Falls and Zambezi, where the tourism industry has been heavily impacted by COVID-19, mostly likely because of lack of income and job losses. An incident of cyanide poisoning in the Makona area of Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe killed two elephants, and a similar incident in the Woodlands area at Victoria Falls National Park killed three elephants. The use of cyanide to kill elephants is not a new phenomenon, but while elephants are usually targeted for their tusks, very often secondary poisoning of predators like vultures, lions can take place because cyanide is unselective. In addition, cyanide poisoning raises concerns for the community, which needs to be warned not to buy meat of uncertain origins.

General Barriers to Successful Conservation Efforts

Wildlife and other natural resources are intertwined with livelihoods in communities around the globe. Natural resources are key engines for a healthy society and economic development, but wildlife knows no boundaries and is often treated as a 'common good'. Building resilient communities, where the rural economy is diverse enough to provide the right balance for sustainability is key to protecting wild animals and habitats in both the short and long terms. And inherent in building successful conservation practices are community participation and equitable benefit sharing.

Regrettably, governments and communities in source countries – the Amazon, sub-Saharan Africa, SE Asia, etc. are resource constrained – Conservation Financing continues to be inadequate, and often non-existent. Desperate local communities --- that truly value wildlife as a source of pride and identify with it for culture, tradition, religion and other sustainable livelihoods needs end up extracting resources wantonly. Meanwhile criminal syndicates entice them and get them to be complicity to poaching.

Safeguarding wildlife and other natural resources is critical, and this is where law enforcement at all levels is vital. Supporting the men and women in protected areas is core to this, complementing ranger training and support with technologies that facilitate identifying and prosecuting wildlife poaching and trafficking, and other illegal activities that degrade the

environment. In the transboundary landscape on the Malawi-Zambia border, IFAW partners with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to do exactly that.

The Malawi-Zambia border is home to three of the most stunning national parks in Southern Africa: Kasungu National Park in Malawi and Lukusuzi and Luambe National Parks in Zambia — which links Malawi to one of Africa's crown jewels: the Luangwa Valley.

Together, these parks are home to hundreds of species, including critically endangered animals like the African wild dog. The rich beauty of the landscape and the even richer diversity of wildlife attract all kinds of conservationists, tourists—and poachers.

In Kasungu, poachers have significantly reduced the local lion and rhino populations, as well as the local elephant population. To make matters worse, law enforcement agencies do not have jurisdiction across borders. If poachers kill an animal in Malawi, they can escape arrest simply by crossing over into Zambia.

In 2015, Malawi's Department of National Parks and Wildlife asked for IFAW's help in stopping Kasungu's poaching problem. We helped to set up the department's first intelligence and investigations unit to handle wildlife trafficking. Thanks to our success, the government then asked us to create a national task force that could extend beyond poaching to stop the trafficking and selling of animal parts as well. In the first 20 months of the program, 189 alleged poachers were arrested by the investigations unit. Of those arrests, 95% of resulted in convictions, and 33% of those arrests led to jail sentences of at least three years.

U.S. Conservation Leadership

IFAW's success in training and supporting rangers in the Malawi-Zambia transboundary landscape would not be possible without U.S. conservation leadership. In particular, the USAID and State Department Wildlife Trafficking Programs. These programs to combat wildlife trafficking focus on fighting poaching, improving global enforcement and prosecution, disrupting networks, and reducing consumer demand for wildlife products. Not only are they critical both to domestic and international conservation efforts and to US security, they are also key to stopping criminal wildlife trade that could result in future zoonotic spillover events. Another important U.S. program in the fight against the illegal wildlife trade is the Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The OLE is on the front lines of wildlife crime, inspecting wildlife shipments, conducting investigations, and enforcing federal wildlife laws to protect fish, wildlife, plants, and ecosystems. The OLE combats poaching and wildlife trafficking, breaking up international criminal rings that not only harm wildlife, but may also engage in other illicit activities.

Among other things, the small but mighty force at OLE sends experienced FWS attachés to strategic regions where they combat wildlife trafficking by supporting and advising foreign

partners. Service wildlife law enforcement attachés are experienced criminal investigators who specialize in wildlife and natural resource investigations. They support wildlife investigations within a host country and region by providing training and capacity building, and they advise on leveraging U.S. assets in the host region to combat wildlife trafficking. Currently there are eleven FWS attachés at American embassies in Brazil (Brasilia), China (Beijing), Gabon (Libreville), Mexico (Mexico City), Lima (Peru), South Africa (Pretoria), Tanzania (Dar es Salaam), Thailand (Bangkok), Germany (Stuttgart), Kenya (Nairobi), and Vietnam (Hanoi), with a new posting eminent in the United Kingdom (London).

Attachés have provided extensive support to local authorities engaged in wildlife trafficking investigations and vital access to FWS resources such as the National Fish and Wildlife Forensic Laboratory and the Digital Evidence Recovery and Technical Support Unit. Several transnational organized crime investigations involving the trafficking of elephant ivory, rhino horn and reptiles between Africa and Asia have been initiated as a direct result of attaché intervention, and attachés have assisted extensively in fostering intelligence sharing and investigative support between affected nations.

These attachés provide critical expertise to law enforcement agencies in the host countries, helping those countries to better identify, arrest, and prosecute wildlife criminals. By helping to shut down trafficking syndicates within source countries, the attaché program is an important front-line defense against zoonotic illnesses that might otherwise be transmitted across borders in trafficked wildlife.

Conclusion

In conclusion, law enforcement is an important piece of the approach to preventing a future pandemic of zoonotic origins. Strong enforcement of wildlife laws and good prosecutorial practice are necessary to thwarting criminals who seek to traffic wildlife across continents, potentially placing global populations at risk from zoonotic illnesses. We must continue to support and indeed ramp up international anti-poaching anti trafficking and law enforcement efforts at this time and in the future. We must increase funding for work on the ground and increase the number of international FWS attachés and wildlife law enforcement at the U.S. borders. We must also look at immediate ways to better support the monitoring efforts of communities in and around international critical conservation areas who have lost capacity in tourism and other sectors with “stay at home” orders while the poachers are still out there – even expanding their activities.

But enforcement cannot exist in a vacuum. While the U.S. invests in critical programs such as those discussed above, we must also take steps to address the root causes of wildlife crime, including poverty and food insecurity and demand for illegal products. And we must also look beyond the illegal trade in wildlife if we truly want to protect against zoonotic pandemics:

habitat destruction and biodiversity loss are also key drivers of zoonotic spillover. This is a pivotal moment in human history – our world has been shut down by the exploitation of wildlife. Our response must be holistic, transformational, and comprehensive. Thank you again for the opportunity for IFAW to offer testimony here today. I look forward to working with you to protect wildlife, conserve habitats, and protect our global population from a future zoonotic pandemic.