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Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight Hearing: The Science of How Hunting Assists Species Conservation and Management Tuesday 19th June, 2pm.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee: thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify on this extraordinarily important topic. I am Stuart Pimm and hold the Doris Duke Chair of Conservation at Duke University in North Carolina. Until recently, I was also Extraordinary Professor at the Conservation Ecology Research Unit at the University of Pretoria in South Africa.

The implied question for this hearing is: does hunting assist species conservation and management? The answer is a simple “yes!” We Americans benefit from large areas protected for hunting, affording as they do the essential habitats for many other non-game species. Duck hunters protect wetlands, while recreational fisherman are passionate advocates for protecting our rivers.

At a personal level, Safari Club International has helped my students in Central America. My colleagues at Everglades National Park and I depend on hunters to track and tag Florida Panthers, allowing us to show how very successful this effort to bring these animals back from the brink of extinction has been. I could go on. Simply, hunters — broadly defined — and conservation professionals share a powerful common purpose in seeking effective stewardship of natural resources.

The issue at hand is whether hunting assists particular species conservation and, as I understand it, endangered species both nationally and internationally that fall under the Endangered Species Act. The answers here are more complex. In brief:

- Is the Act successful? An emphatic “yes!”
- Does hunting endangered species benefit their long-term conservation? It can, but often doesn’t. Stewardship requires the conservation and hunting communities to resolve many difficult issues.
- Finally, do I think the Act is able to handle those difficult issues? Again, an emphatic “yes!”

Once a species is listed by the Act its chance of survival is excellent. Our National Bird, the bald eagle is now in every state. Endangered species protection has brought the nene — the Hawai’i state bird — the whooping crane, the black-footed ferret, grey whales, and many other species back from the very brink of extinction. “Recovery” is the ultimate goal of the Act. Analyses show that the majority of species are on their way to meeting their recovery goals. Species are “going forth and multiplying” at about the rates we scientists predict, if not “overnight” as some critics have expected.

Internationally, the Fish and Wildlife Service has a very small, but effective program — one that has supported my African colleagues and students for our work on elephants.

Nothing better illustrates the complexity of hunting endangered species than African wildlife. Kenya and Tanzania are neighbors in East Africa. Kenya bans all hunting. Tanzania devotes far more of its land to hunting concessions than to national parks. That hunting includes lions — an IUCN Red List threatened species. Whether they are managed well is a matter of considerable debate. My recent work on that subject suggests we simply do not know. What is certain is that some African countries that once allowed lion hunts no longer have them. Hunting — and the substantial income it can generate — does not guarantee good management.

Does hunting sometimes harm endangered species? Poaching obviously does. What about legal hunting? There are two circumstances — hunting inside a natural species' range and hunting captive populations outside its range, including in the USA.

For the former, by protecting land, hunting can do a great deal of good, but ivory illustrates the complexities. Even infrequent, government-sponsored ivory sales designed to raise revenues for wildlife conservation maintain a profession I would happily see go extinct — ivory carvers. Their continuation means that the many other countries without adequate policing are losing their elephants to poaching.

The situation for tigers is even more desperate. There are far more in captivity than in the wild, bred for their bones and blood used in traditional, if exceedingly dubious, medicines. Poaching is the most serious threat to tigers. African lions are now tarred with the same brush. Body parts from legal “canned hunts” of lions on private properties are now being sold as substitutes for tiger, putting pressure on wild lions and tigers alike.

To be blunt: the illegal wildlife trade is thought to be second only to drug trafficking and there is widespread speculation that these illegal activities associate with other ills, including terrorism [1]. In short, even legal hunting of endangered species has the potential to do considerable harm — unintentional harm, surely, but harm nonetheless.

Can hunting outside a species' natural range do good? Clearly, “yes!” The standards are high, however.

The ultimate goal of listing species is to conserve them and the ecosystems on which they depend and ultimately to secure recovery in the wild. Simply, having large numbers of animals in captivity — whether hunted or not — is not sufficient in itself. Neither is making more of a species for commercial exploitation.

I suggest this minimum checklist with regard to the hunting of captive, endangered species. If one answers “yes” to all these, then “bravo!”

- Can some of the captive animals be eventually returned to the wild?
- Is there a recovery plan that can use or integrate the captive animals in a scientifically sound manner? [2]
- Indeed, is there a need for captive hunting of a given species? Or are there already sufficient animals in well-funded zoos and like institutions?
- Has sufficient attention been paid to their breeding and especially their genetics? Are hunting ranches members of the recognized organizations that maintain the relevant breeding databases?

- Does the enthusiasm for hunting the species in captivity extend to supporting efforts to protect them in the wild or reintroduce populations where they have been extirpated?

The Endangered Species Act handles these complexities. The Act's regulatory regime is sound: it requires policy makers to look at the full record before we do something as bold —and potentially harmful — as allow an endangered species to be “taken.” That is why the case-by-case, permit-by-permit method of the Act is so important.

In sum, good conservation takes good laws and good enforcement of laws — but it also takes good stewardship: responsible hunters, fishermen and sportsmen are sound stewards of our natural resources and we should not overlook that. Hunting is a part of conservation, as long as it is regulated with proper enforcement and as long as it conforms to sound ecological principles.

My Chairman, members of the committee: thank you for the opportunity to discuss these issues, initiating as it does, the opportunity for an essential dialogue between the conservation and hunting communities.

Footnotes

1. Congressional Research Service, International Illegal Trade in Wildlife and U.S. Policy <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/102621.pdf>

2. For example, in the USA, the Associate of Zoos and Aquariums has more than 300 Species Survival Plan Programs <http://www.aza.org/species-survival-plan-program/>