

## **Chair Grijalva Opening Statement: Protecting Human Rights in International Conservation**

Thank you, Chair Huffman and Ranking Member Bentz, for holding this hearing on human rights and international conservation efforts. We don't always agree on things in this committee, but I would like to thank the Ranking Member for working with me in a bipartisan manner on this critical issue of protecting human rights.

I appreciate the work that committee staff on both sides of the aisle have done to understand the issue of protecting human and indigenous rights in conservation abroad and develop solutions that will address our concerns.

The House Natural Resources Committee is not the only one investigating the atrocities carried out by conservation park rangers at national parks worldwide, outlined in Chair Huffman's opening statement.

The United Kingdom Charity Commission, the regulator for charities in Britain, and WWF-Germany also announced independent investigations. In addition, the Department of the Interior and the Government Accountability Office carried out investigations.

The reports of decades of abuse in the name of conservation are deeply upsetting. Some reports and stories were from the early 2000s, and others were as recent as 2019.

WWF-International and WWF-US were both implicated. As we dug into the allegations, we realized high-level officials, including a former U.N. expert on Indigenous Rights, had warned for years

of the mistreatment of indigenous people living around conservation parks.

I echo Chair Huffman's frustration with how WWF dealt with the allegations. They kept most allegations hidden and conducted internal investigations. They only started to deal with them publicly once BuzzFeed made reports public and we started investigating. And over-and-over, they distanced themselves and shifted blame.

WWF provided four of these internal reports outlining horrific human rights abuses at parks in other countries to the committee and only allowed committee staff to read the most recent report under the watchful eye of their lawyers. In addition, there are two other reports that Committee staff believe exist, but WWF did not provide them to us.

Although I'm disappointed that WWF's CEO Carter Roberts chose not to participate in this hearing, I'm grateful to Ms. Ginette Hemley for being here to provide testimony and answer our questions.

We originally planned to have this hearing in March of 2020 but chose to postpone it due to the pandemic.

However, I understand that WWF has now taken steps to improve its practices and safeguard against future human rights abuses. I hope today's conversation will be productive and that we'll leave this hearing with a better understanding of the actions WWF is taking.

Indigenous people are the best stewards of their land and wildlife, but they have often been left out of conservation efforts, or worse, banned from their lands in the name of conservation. A rights-based approach should be the basis for how the U.S. and its global partners invest in and carry out conservation.

Community-based conservation efforts led by local community members and integrating their needs and rights into conservation will result in more successful, long-term conservation.

This principle is becoming more critical as the global conversation on climate action occurs: we must protect nature to meet our climate goals. But we must go about it correctly from the start, with indigenous people as full partners in the effort.

So today, I hope we receive more transparency and learn more about how WWF is changing its practices to uphold human rights throughout its conservation efforts.

I also expect this hearing to inform us about what we in Congress should be doing to ensure accountability for taxpayer investments in conservation and to elevate the role of human rights in our conservation efforts.

Thanks again to the witnesses for being here today, and I look forward to the discussion.

I yield back.