



Testimony of Bryan Christy

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“U.S. Interests in Africa”

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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and distinguished members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for holding this important hearing today to explore methods for strengthening U.S. ties with African countries. The leadership of the Committee on enhancing this bond is critical, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share my expertise and assist with your mission.

Park rangers, game wardens, and other wildlife crime fighters operating in Africa represent order in rural and wild places under siege by terrorist and other criminal enterprises, transforming these traditional protectors of wildlife and protected areas into a first line of defense against terrorism, destabilized states, emerging disease, human rights abuses, and corruption.

The United States has a direct interest in staunching terrorism and other transnational crimes, in reducing global instability, in anticipating emerging diseases such as Ebola, and in conserving the world’s most valued wildlife and natural resources for the health of global ecosystems and the enjoyment of current and future generations.

The United States has elevated its focus on wildlife trafficking through such official measures as President Obama’s Executive Order “Combatting Wildlife Trafficking,” which established a cabinet-level wildlife trafficking taskforce,ⁱ and President Trump’s Executive Order, “Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking.”ⁱⁱ Congress’s recent bipartisan passage of the Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt (END) Wildlife Trafficking Act signed into law in 2016 further clarifies U.S. interests in wildlife trafficking and sets priorities for addressing it.

My testimony this morning will address organized crime, extremist militias, and terrorism as they relate to Africa’s wildlife, protected areas, and park rangers. I note that journalists across Africa risk violence, incarceration, and worse for reporting on crime involving the powerful or corrupt, including on wildlife crime. It is therefore from a privileged position that a foreign journalist like myself comments on crime in Africa. Issues of poverty, climate change-induced drought, population growth, and other worthy and pressing concerns for Africa and U.S. interests are outside the scope of my testimony.

ORGANIZED CRIME

Transnational wildlife crime represents a transfer of life from range states, primarily in Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America to its consumers, typically in north Asia, Europe, and the United States. Organized criminal syndicates traffic nearly every part of most of the threatened or endangered animals on the planet, including elephant teeth, rhinoceros horn, shark fins, tiger pelts, bear paws, pangolin scales, and more. They move live animals including apes, monkeys, big cats, rare birds, and reptiles. They

destroy entire ecosystems, plundering forests of protected timber to supply the furniture industry, vacuuming coral reefs and their inhabitants to supply the aquarium trade.

An estimated 30,000 African elephants are illegally killed each year for their teeth, an unsustainable rate which unchecked will lead to the animals' extinction. Rhinos face similar pressures for their horns, and already several rhinoceros species are recently extinct in Africa and Asia.

The wildlife trafficking problem is widely known, though not adequately addressed in many African countries even in terms of basic, intelligence-led investigative techniques, prosecutions, and convictions. Rarely is a trafficking kingpin identified, let alone brought to justice.

Corruption remains a significant problem in many range and consumer states. Ivory and rhino horn-related corruption infects park rangers, police, customs officers, prosecutors, judges, and politicians. It pits law enforcement against itself. In South Africa's Kruger National Park, for example, home to the world's largest wild rhinoceros population, park rangers cannot take poaching cases to local police or judges due to corruption.

Many countries fail to recognize the significance of wildlife crime in terms of economic value to criminals and cost to ecosystems. This failure to adequately prioritize wildlife crime and to enforce wildlife laws is what makes it so highly lucrative to transnational criminal syndicates. In some cases laws are inadequate to the crimes, in others, laws may carry penalties judges consider too severe to impose on a wildlife trafficker.

Finding a balance between crimes and penalties, educating prosecutors and judges, and supporting well-functioning judicial systems are in the interest of the United States.

TERRORISM

Park rangers, game wardens, and other wildlife crime fighters in Africa represent a front line against terrorism, extremist groups, and violent militias.ⁱⁱⁱ Park rangers protect wildlife and wild spaces, but they also represent a local police force, often the only trustworthy police force in remote areas, making them important to the stability of communities throughout the continent, and of value to advancing U.S. interests in stabilized states, the study and management of emerging diseases, the protection of human rights, and the prosecution of wildlife criminals.

Terrorists Hide In Parks

Many of the most dangerous extremist and militia groups operating in Africa today have sought or currently find refuge inside forests and protected areas. These include Boko Haram in Sambisa Forest^{iv}, Nigeria; Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army in Garamba National Park, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); and the FDLR, the Rwandan Hutu rebel militia in Virunga National Park, DRC, perpetrators of the 1994 Rwandan genocide in which 800,000 people died.

Other extremist groups, such as Al Shabaab in Somalia exploit forest resources to finance themselves, taxing charcoal, for example, in the case of Shabaab; or killing elephants for ivory in the case of Seleka, an alliance of mostly Muslim rebel groups whose battle with the Christian and animist rebel group, Anti-Balaka, have thrust the Central African Republic into civil war.

Elephants and Rhinos as Strategic Resources

Ivory and rhino horn are trafficked for cash by criminal organizations in Africa, Asia, and the West and used as currency by terrorist groups to buy arms, medicine, and other necessities, transforming these animals and their parts into strategic resources for criminal and terrorist organizations.

South Sudan. The Central African Republic (CAR). The DRC. Sudan. Chad. Five of the world's least stable nations, as ranked by the Washington, D.C.-based organization the Fund for Peace, are home to groups who travel to other countries to kill elephants.

The Lord's Resistance Army, Seleka, the FDLR, and extremist groups operating in Mali, where rangers are regularly a target of "terrorist armed groups,"^v have been implicated in ivory trafficking, as well.

Wildlife trafficking is a destabilizing force in even established African countries such as Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa. Each has faced significant corruption, sometimes at even the highest levels of government, involving illegal trade in elephant ivory and rhino horn. Protecting these strategic species and reducing demand for their parts in Asia and the rest of the world cuts off funds to transnational criminals, including violent militias and terrorists.

Sudan: A Poaching Super State

Combining both criminality and support for violent groups, Sudan bears attention. Though it has no elephants of its own, Sudan is both home and host to elephant poachers and ivory traffickers--including the Janjaweed, the Lord's Resistance Army, and Sudanese Armed Forces--who use the country, especially Darfur, as home base, and travel across the continent to kill elephants in national parks and protected areas.

Sudan's president Omar al-Bashir, who has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity for actions in Darfur, protects these groups which engage in elephant killing raids on foot and on horseback. Raids launched from Sudan and Chad have resulted in some of the most brutal elephant killings in modern history, including the killing of as many as 650 elephants in Cameroon in 2012.

Elephant poaching by those sequestered in and around Sudan is not as high as that in East and lately southern Africa in terms of number of elephants killed, but it is more violent, more disruptive to society, and it is resulting in murdered rangers across the region, including in Garamba National Park and Zakouma National Park in Chad.

Terrorist and Rebel Groups are Connecting

In some cases, Africa's most violent groups are connecting with each other, and seek relations outside the continent. Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2015,^{vi} leading to Boko Haram's being designated the terrorist group's West African province (ISWAP), a relationship continued by Shekau's faction, and by that of a second Boko Haram faction leader, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, according to reports citing the ISIS-linked magazine, *Al-Naba*.^{vii}

Joseph Kony's LRA has linked with Seleka in the CAR, and Kony expressed an intention to establish relations with Boko Haram, according to an LRA defector I interviewed in 2014.^{viii}

Al Shabaab represents the Somali affiliate of Al-Qaeda.

In Mali, where Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) continues to expand,^{ix} taking on new partners earlier this year,^x extremist groups have been linked to elephant poaching and the killing of wildlife rangers.^{xi}

Beyond Wildlife: Extraordinary Costs to Human Life and State Stability

Taken together, these terrorist and militia groups represent a staggering impact on people, wildlife, and governance across Africa. Often the only legitimate force in place in remote and rural areas to oppose these groups are park rangers and game wardens.

Hundreds of FDLR currently occupy Virunga National Park, making it the most dangerous park in the world to be a park ranger. In 2014, Virunga's Chief Ranger, Emmanuel de Merode was shot four times in the stomach and legs by unidentified assailants at a time when his park was under pressure from illegal fishing operators on Lake Edward, charcoal traffickers, elephant poachers, and international oil interests seeking to open up the park. Considered a hero by his fellow rangers, de Merode has sought to bring sustainable development to the park while at the same time routing corruption, and protecting the park and its wildlife. De Merode, whose rangers protect the world's largest remaining population of mountain gorillas, has lost 41 men under his command and his park has lost at least 150 rangers since civil war began in the DRC.

During a series of raids beginning in December 2008, Joseph Kony's LRA killed 800 people, including 8 Garamba rangers and staff, kidnapped 160 children, and displaced 100,000 people. Since it began recording data in 2008, the group Invisible Children has recorded 2,339 LRA attacks on civilians in which they abducted 7,565 people and killed 3,116 others in CAR, DRC, and South Sudan.

Boko Haram, kidnapper of school children, has been implicated in the deaths of 15,000 people and the displacement of more than 2 million.

These groups often do not occupy parks solely, or even primarily, for their wildlife. They occupy them as hideouts and as places from which to prey on villagers for food, water and medicine. Their crimes include murder, rape and kidnapping. They poach animals for food, to traffic their parts as bushmeat, and to exchange for weapons and other needs.

They also kill wildlife to send a message to wildlife rangers and others who might oppose them. In Virunga, charcoal traffickers killed six mountain gorillas in 2012 in an effort to eliminate what they perceived to be a main driver of public opposition to their illegal trade, gorilla-related tourism.

Rangers Represent Order and are Being Killed for It

Park rangers do more than protect wildlife. They secure land, protect villagers, and help stabilize communities. In many places, police and military are corrupt. To see a police officer, soldier, or even a United Nations peacekeeping representative at your doorstep can be to fear for your property, your safety, even your life. The 2015 alleged rape of citizens by U.N. MINUSCA peacekeepers operating in CAR underscores that security in central Africa is a rare and precious resource.

In remote and rural areas park rangers and game wardens are often the only law enforcement standing between violent groups and the villagers on whom they prey. As a result, these groups target park rangers not for animals, but to advance their lawlessness. Protected areas in Central Africa and West Africa can represent islands of stability in oceans of chaos.

Rangers' protection of land and community creates an opportunity to replenish wildlife destroyed by poaching. But once the land is lost, that opportunity is gone. Supporting rangers secures habitat as a hedge against extinction.

Garamba: A Killing Zone

Rangers on the ground are often insufficiently equipped to take on the militarized, mechanized, organized force they must confront. In Garamba National Park, for example, there are signs elephants having been shot through the tops of their heads from helicopters. Yet I witnessed rangers having to work with limited ammunition and to use compromised weapons taken from poachers because of red tape involved in legally acquiring adequate weapons.

Villagers along the park's perimeter told me they considered Garamba's park rangers to be their most important protectors. The park is managed by the non-governmental organization, African Parks Congo, an affiliate of African Parks of South Africa, in partnership with the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN). In Garamba, as with many other key parks, rangers build schools, medical facilities, churches and mosques. Importantly, when the LRA and other groups attack the park they do it not only to raid the park's ivory stockpile, they do it to kill the rangers who stand between the terrorists and the people they want to murder, rape, and kidnap, and for the food and medicine they want to steal. Rangers represent order and they're being killed for it.

In the past ten years, Garamba has lost 22 rangers; two were killed last month.

Bushmeat and Emerging Disease

Stability is an underappreciated element in controlling the emergence and spread of disease. The Ebola epidemic in West Africa, 2014-2015, was made vastly worse by 20 years of political upheaval and civil wars in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, which had so weakened their infrastructures generally and health care systems in particular that the outbreak was made much worse. Every Ebola outbreak since the first known appearance of the disease, in 1976, killed only two or three hundred people at most—whereas this event in West Africa killed more than 11,000, sickened more than 27,000, and cost billions of dollars, including millions to the US. The Ebola virus itself was not different from earlier outbreaks. The circumstances of those societies were different, and as a result, an outbreak became an epidemic, spreading costs and fear around the world.

By providing stability in remote areas, rangers play an important prophylactic role against disease. The community liaison work of rangers on the ground opens doors when diseases emerge. Rangers facilitate intelligence gathering across the continent, offering ways of sharing international values with isolated communities.

The benefits of support for park rangers and other wildlife crime fighters includes disrupting trade in animal species (bushmeat trade) that carry, or can cause, deadly disease in humans, as well as in providing security in remote areas where study or treatment of emerging diseases is important.

All over Central Africa the direct hunting of, and trade in, bushmeat of certain types exposes people to extreme jeopardy of Ebola and Marburg virus. The species include gorillas, chimps, and (for Marburg, and possibly also Ebola) giant fruit bats, which are also harvested in great numbers as food.

Rangers police the bushmeat trade, and represent potential security for doctors and medical researchers investigating emerging diseases in remote areas.

OPPORTUNITIES

Diplomacy and Demand Reduction

Diplomacy was critical to an historic agreement between President Xi of China and President Obama to eliminate their country's respective ivory industries. Demand for wildlife products in Asia, especially ivory and rhino horn, is a driver of international crime, including terrorism, in Africa. China has since promised to shutdown its ivory industry by the end of this year.^{xii}

Further efforts to reduce demand in China, as well as in likely spillover countries in Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, are necessary to give effect to the commitments by China and the U.S., and to anticipate increased trafficking to those countries as their economies grow.

Information Sharing

Free Press is Critical

In most African countries, if not all, journalists struggle to investigate and report stories involving political corruption. In some cases the media is state controlled. In others it's owned by conglomerates involved in corruption. More than once I've asked an African journalist why he or she doesn't report a story I would want to report on if it were happening in my country. The answer I get is, "I would be killed if I wrote that story." This needs to change.

Empower Individuals

In 2013, the State Department invited me to West Africa as part of its Speakers Program to give a series of talks to government officials there about ivory trafficking. Togo has almost no elephants, but it was in the process of completing the second largest deep water port in Sub-Saharan Africa. I suggested Togo would likely see an effort by international traffickers to smuggle ivory through their new port. Sitting in the audience that day was a young officer from Togo's Office Against Narcotics and Money Laundering, Lieutenant Essossimna Awi. Awi returned to the port where he took one of the scanners his team was using to x-ray incoming shipping containers for drugs and weapons, and turned it around to x-ray, for the first time, outgoing shipments. A few months later he made the largest ivory seizure in African history, over 4 tons hidden inside a shipment of timber bound for Vietnam. Secretary of State John Kerry personally telephoned President Faure to commend his country's success. Faure then published an op-ed challenging other countries to join his country's fight,^{xiii} was given a seat on Interpol's program focused on wildlife crime, and emerged as a leader on the issue.

Important U.S. Programs

The United States has much to offer Africa in terms of training, resources, and diplomacy. Programs that bring together law enforcement, judiciary, journalists, and others, separately or together, to enable

them to network are invaluable to countering transnational criminal syndicates that do not face diplomatic limitations on crossing borders.

I do not pretend to have comprehensive knowledge of programs that might advance the interests I've raised this morning. I can cite some programs I've encountered that seem to be on the right track, in addition to the efforts by the many conservation organizations whose work is important, but which are too numerous to mention.

Programs with important impact that seek to improve enforcement across Africa include the International Attaché program operated by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement, the State Department's Speaker's Program and its International Visitor Leadership Program, the EAGLE Network's non-governmental effort to monitor and support prosecutions, and various Wildlife Enforcement Networks (WENs).

Access to equipment and materiel requires both funding and government authorization. The problem is not always a matter of ability to pay for munitions, but rather the ability to access materiel in countries where government or military leadership restricts importation or carrying of arms out of fear those weapons may be turned against the state. Here U.S. diplomacy might help.

In 2016, National Geographic hosted an evening to bring together Africa's park rangers as part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's International Conservation Chiefs Academy.^{xiv} Criminals, including terrorists, operate across national lines, but law enforcement often lacks the funding, authority, or relationships to do the same. A similar program, National Association of Conservation Law Enforcement Chiefs (NACLEC) is run for domestic enforcement chiefs in the U.S. Building personal and institutional relationships among officers and government officials is one way to bridge this gap.

A number of U.S. programs directed at protecting key species, land, and community have had important impacts for elephants, rhinoceroses, big cats, great apes, and marine turtles as part of the so-called Multinational Species Conservation Acts enacted by Congress.^{xv} The Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt (END) Wildlife Trafficking Act signed into law in 2016 likewise makes an important contribution to tackling transnational wildlife crime, and I look forward to its impact.

Conclusion

By focusing on the needs of park rangers and other stewards on the ground in Africa, by encouraging networking among rangers around the world, by training prosecutors and judges regarding wildlife crime, by supporting a free press, by working to reduce demand, and by engaging at a diplomatic level with government leaders across the continent regarding wildlife crime and violent extremism, the U.S. has an opportunity to advance its interests in national security, health, human rights, the environment, and wildlife.

In conclusion, Congress has the ability to advance positive policies that would enhance the relationship between the United States and countries throughout Africa. I would again like to thank Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and the full committee for allowing me to submit testimony today. I look forward to working further to advance these goals.

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- ⁱ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/01/executive-order-combating-wildlife-trafficking>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/09/presidential-executive-order-enforcing-federal-law-respect-transnational>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/tracking-ivory/article.html>
- ^{iv} <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/buhari-boko-haram-base-retaken-sambisa-forest-161224125809113.html>
- ^v <https://minusma.unmissions.org/point-de-presse-jeudi-8-octobre-2015>
- ^{vi} <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/tracking-ivory/article.html>
- ^{vii} <http://www.newsweek.com/boko-haram-isis-abubakar-shekau-abu-musab-al-barnawi-496615>
- ^{viii} <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/tracking-ivory/article.html>
- ^{ix} https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/world/africa/al-qaedas-african-offshoot-makes-a-lethal-comeback.html?_r=1
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- ^{xiii} <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/faure-gnassingb-failure-to-act-on-poaching-will-place-elephants-on-the-path-to-extinction-9121960.html>
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