

TESTIMONY

OF

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BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS**

before the

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE  
AND OCEANS**

**COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

on

**H.R. 4455  
WILDLIFE WITHOUT BORDERS AUTHORIZATION ACT**

JUNE 24, 2008

Thank you Madame Chair for the opportunity to testify today on HR 4455--the Wildlife without Borders Authorization Act.

My name is Dr. Patrick Burchfield and I am the director of the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas. Today, I am testifying on behalf of the 218 accredited institutions of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). The Zoo is an accredited member of the AZA.

In general, AZA supports the conservation tenets of HR 4455 but we would strongly encourage the Subcommittee to consider raising the authorization limits placed on the bill to capitalize on the success, cost-effectiveness and the future opportunities associated with the Wildlife without Borders programs.

AZA and its member institutions are proud to work with Congress, the Federal agencies, conservation organizations, the private sector and the general public to conserve our wildlife heritage. With 160 million visitors to 218 accredited zoos and aquariums, AZA's focus on connecting people and animals provides a critical link to helping animals in their native habitats. Far-reaching conservation programs at AZA institutions have provided support over 3,700 field conservation and research projects in more than 100 countries. AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums are among the leaders in the protection of endangered species. Twenty years ago, AZA established the Species Survival Plan (SSP) program – a long-term plan involving genetically diverse breeding, habitat preservation, public education, field conservation and supportive research to ensure survival for many threatened and endangered species. Currently, AZA members are involved in 110 SSP programs that include more than 160 species.

As centers for conservation volunteerism, AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums offer the public a great way to discover connections to their environment and to learn how they can make a difference in conservation. Annually, more than 58,000 volunteers invest over 3,000,000 hours of their time supporting virtually every aspect of zoo and aquarium operations. AZA-accredited institutions also teach more than 12 million people each year in living classrooms, and have provided training to more than 400,000 teachers.

Opened in 1971, the Gladys Porter Zoo was built directly out of concern for endangered wildlife and to educate the community of South Texas about the importance of preserving the planet's resources. We strive to maintain a world-class zoological and botanical park, and to provide a positive recreational experience to an increasingly large group of visitors, both national and international. Through our daily routines, we aspire to making significant contributions to the cooperative captive management of threatened and endangered species. Our education programs are geared to establish a conservation ethic in the beneficiaries of our presentations. We present them with enthusiasm, in hopes that our efforts will ultimately help preserve the diversity of remaining wild creatures and their habitats. Like all AZA institutions, we also make contributions to scientific studies that will aid in the conservation of wildlife.

In reviewing the language of HR 4455, I took particular note of Section 4 (a) which states that the purpose of the bill is to “provide international wildlife conservation assistance through initiation, facilitation and promotion of locally adapted wildlife management and conservation

programs in coordination with non-governmental organizations, government, private businesses and community leaders.” In microcosm, that is exactly the philosophy of the Gladys Porter Zoo and our field work—and probably the same for other AZA accredited zoos and aquariums.

We are in a unique position at the Gladys Porter Zoo. Located at the southernmost tip of Texas, Brownsville sits right on the border between the United States and Mexico. It is one of the few federally authorized wildlife ports of entry. We have historically worked closely with state and federal wildlife agents in our area. We are the logical candidate to provide veterinary and rehabilitation services for sick and injured local wildlife, as well as housing and placement of animals confiscated at U.S./Mexico border crossings.

Because of our close proximity to Mexico and our interest in its diverse fauna, for the past 35 years we have also been engaged in the conservation of the world’s most critically endangered sea turtle, the Kemp’s ridley. On one day of June 1947, Sr. Andres Herrera, from Tampico, Tamaulipas, made an historic film of tens of thousands of nesting sea turtles coming ashore and returning to the Gulf of Mexico after depositing their clutches of eggs. The film lay unknown to science until screened by Dr. Henry Hildebrand at an annual convention of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists in 1961. This massive nesting phenomenon, termed “arribada” in Spanish, along with the location of these turtles then came to light. In the ensuing years -- between 1947 and the early 1960s -- this population endured unrelenting exploitation for eggs, meat and leather; and when Mexican biologists began efforts to save what remained of the population, the arribadas of up to an estimated forty-thousand individuals had plummeted from five-thousand to two-thousand, and were dropping rapidly. In the late 1970s, the governments of Mexico and the United States joined together in a desperate attempt to salvage what was left of the Kemp’s ridley. In 1978, 902 nests for the entire season were all that remained of the reproductive effort. Despite strict protection of the nesting females and their eggs, the total take of the reproductive effort resulted in the most rapid decline of any species since the extinction of the passenger pigeon. The population reached its all-time low in 1985 with a total of 702 nests representing approximately 280 nesting females for that year. Mexican and U.S. federal, state, and local government agencies, NGOs and individuals stayed the course, despite discouraging results and harsh conditions.

Thirty years later there is good news. Thanks to support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its international program, SEMARNAT / CONANP of Mexico, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the fishing industries of Mexico and the United States, and countless other businesses and individuals – more than 28 cooperating entities - the Kemp’s ridley sea turtle is crawling and swimming its way back from the brink of extinction. We are well on our way toward the downlisting of this species. In 2007, 15,000 nests were protected and more than one million hatchlings were released into the Gulf of Mexico.

Were it not for the long term support by the governments of both countries, this species would surely already have become extinct. Many individuals may have difficulty understanding the impact that one species can have on entire ecosystems. To put it in a different context, liken the loss of a species to the loss of a cog in the gears of your automobile. Clearly it is the forerunner of more serious problems to come.

Like other AZA-accredited zoos, the Gladys Porter Zoo is involved with other conservation programs around the world. This includes programs for endangered crocodilians, iguanas, margay cats, ocelots and tree kangaroos, to mention a few. The rapid loss and degradation of wild places around the world necessitates that all countries work together to try and maintain what is left of our global marine and terrestrial ecosystems for our very own survival and for that of future generations.

Madame Chair, according to recent estimates, 20 percent or more of the world's biodiversity could disappear over the next two decades, primarily due to habitat fragmentation and alteration, climate change and the over-exploitation of threatened and endangered species. It is therefore vital that more citizens, governments, institutions and organizations become involved in efforts to conserve our imperiled environment. HR4455 provides the framework for building that capacity.

For example, over the duration of the African elephant, Asian elephant, great ape, marine turtle and rhino/tiger conservation funds, the U.S. Congress has appropriated tens of millions of dollars that have been leveraged more than three-fold from host countries and local/international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This is a significant partnership—especially in terms of government programs. The funds provided by Congress have served as the catalyst for the implementation of hundreds of projects worldwide ranging from highly sophisticated and innovative data collection, tracking, research and monitoring programs to simply providing essential on-the-ground resources—weapons, ammunition, vehicles and communication systems—to game wardens and law enforcement officials who have been entrusted to protect these magnificent animals from the ravages of civil unrest, poaching and habitat exploitation.

What makes these programs effective is that the US Fish and Wildlife Service distributes the funds in a timely and efficient manner with very few bureaucratic entanglements. The funds are targeted to high-priority field conservation efforts that most directly benefit the species or region of most concern. More importantly, these programs have long-recognized the value of promoting cooperative projects among government entities, NGOs and the affected local communities in the range states. This is essential because it is only through local action, local education, and local support that realistic solutions for saving these species and critical habitats can be effectively devised and implemented.

Madame Chair, while we strongly support the intent and passage of HR 4455 and applaud Congressman Young and you for this effort, we are also concerned about the size of the Wildlife without Borders budget. While we have seen some incremental growth in the dollars appropriated by Congress for these critical international conservation programs--thanks in large part to the support of this Committee and Subcommittee and the actions of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee--the overall international conservation account is not growing fast enough to meet the significant wildlife and habitat needs.

Therefore, AZA respectfully requests that the Subcommittee amend HR 4455 to significantly increase the authorization levels for fiscal years 2009 through 2013. The demands are too numerous, the opportunities too boundless and the stakes are too high not to reward a small,

efficient program that has made tremendous contributions to wildlife conservation—especially in these times of global economic, social and environmental uncertainty.

Again Madame Chair, AZA wholeheartedly supports this effort and we look forward to working with you and the Subcommittee to secure swift passage of this bill. In addition, AZA member institutions will continue to raise the awareness of our 160 million visitors each year to bring focus on threatened species and habitats worldwide for it is public awareness and public appreciation of their plight that has helped engage the U.S. as a major catalyst for world concern.

Thank you again for this opportunity to comment on this important wildlife conservation measure. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

