

Testimony

of

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before the

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, OCEANS, AND WILDLIFE**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

on

**WOW 101: The State of Wildlife**

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Thank you Chairman Huffman and Ranking Member McClintock for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee today about the state of wildlife.

My name is Dan Ashe, and I am the President and CEO of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Founded in 1924, the AZA is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, education, science, and recreation. AZA's 233 accredited aquariums, nature centers, science centers and zoos annually see more than 195 million visitors, collectively generate more than \$22 billion in annual economic activity, and support more than 208,000 jobs across the country. In 2017, AZA-accredited facilities spent \$220 million on field conservation in 128 countries benefiting 863 species and subspecies. Within those 863 species and subspecies, 281 are listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In the last 10 years, accredited zoos and aquariums formally trained more than 400,000 teachers, supporting science curricula with effective teaching materials and hands-on opportunities.

At the heart of the AZA's mission is its accreditation process, which assures that only those zoos and aquariums that meet the highest standards can become members of the AZA. The rigorous, independent, unbiased, and exhaustive AZA accreditation process includes self-evaluation, on-site inspection, and peer review. Our standards are publicly-available, continuously evolving and improving as we learn more about the needs of the animals in our care. Accreditation is mandatory for all AZA aquariums and zoos. Once earned, it confers best-in-class status, an important message for local, state, and federal government and the visiting public.

AZA and its members are leaders, partners, and participants in species conservation. We work in concert with Congress, the federal agencies, conservation organizations, state governments, the private sector, and the general public to conserve our wildlife heritage. In particular, AZA and its member facilities have long-standing partnerships with the USFWS, NOAA, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Our collaborative efforts have focused on:

- Engaging in endangered species recovery and reintroduction;
- Supporting multinational species conservation funds and state wildlife grants; and
- Collaborating on partnership opportunities involving national parks and wildlife refuges, migratory birds, freshwater and saltwater fisheries, national marine sanctuaries, illegal wildlife trade, amphibians, and invasive species.

In short, the modern, AZA-accredited aquarium or zoo is a wildlife conservation organization. We know that the unprecedented challenges facing our planet in the 21st century are as complex as they are urgent. With the rise in habitat degradation, overexploitation of natural resources, the spread of invasive species, and the growing plastics and pollution crisis, the environment's defenses are ever weakening. Scientists estimate that the total number of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish has declined by 60% since 1970. In the span of fifty years, a fifth of the Amazon rainforest has vanished, and in just the last 30 years, the oceans have lost about half of their shallow water corals. Evidence suggests that we are living amidst the planet's sixth mass extinction. Climate change presents an overarching challenge that is accelerating this

crisis. Without urgent and deliberate intervention today, we are facing the very real possibility of losing some of our planet's most magnificent creatures, such as lions, cheetahs, elephants, gorillas, sea turtles, and sharks, the ecosystems they support, and the ecosystem benefits that we as humans depend upon.

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums have a unique responsibility to help others understand this crisis. It is our obligation - to these animals and to all life on earth - to take bold action now to protect our planet's biodiversity.

Recent history shows that success is achievable. AZA and its members stand ready to help, as we have historically, in playing a significant role in bringing over 25 species back from the brink of extinction.

The California condor, officially labeled as extinct in the wild in 1987, has been bred in human care and is being reintroduced in the wild by a coalition of groups including San Diego Zoo Global, The Peregrine Fund, the Los Angeles Zoo, the Oregon Zoo, Santa Barbara Zoo, and the Ventana Wildlife Society. In 1982, with only twenty-two condors left in the wild, San Diego Zoo Global began the first breeding program for California condors. The program also involved the USFWS, California Department of Fish and Game, the National Audubon Society, and the Los Angeles Zoo. Within twenty years, the population of California condors grew to almost 200. The zoological breeding programs now release 20 to 40 condors annually, and according to USFWS officials, the California condor population has reached a total of 435 birds, 268 of which are living in the wild in California, Arizona, Utah, and Baja California, Mexico.

In 1941, whooping crane populations reached their lowest recorded numbers at less than 20 individuals. The future of the species appeared dismal with little hope of recovery. In 1967, the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, in partnership with the International Crane Foundation, other AZA-accredited zoos, and additional partner organizations, embarked on a breeding and reintroduction program to halt declines. In 2017, when the federal government announced that it would close its whooping crane breeding facility after 50 years, AZA-accredited facilities stepped up to take care of the flock and continue providing birds for the USFWS recovery effort. Today, more than 400 birds exist in the wild, and nearly 200 birds are in breeding programs supporting reintroduction.

Another success story is the black-footed ferret. In 2016, on the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of when the species was rediscovered after having been believed to be extinct, a historic reintroduction took place when 35 ferrets were released on two private ranches near Meeteetse, Wyoming – near the site where the ferret was rediscovered. This reintroduction was made possible by rules that convey protection to landowners if a ferret is killed during legal activity, marking another positive step toward recovery for the black-footed ferret, one of North America's most endangered mammals.

This reintroduction was supported by the AZA and its accredited facilities in numerous ways: the Phoenix Zoo, Louisville Zoo, Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, and Santa Barbara Zoo each contributed funds to support the necessary dusting of the prairie dog colonies with the insecticide

deltamethrin (Delta Dust) to address the presence of sylvatic plague, a flea-borne disease that has decimated the prairie dog population.

Black-footed ferrets are currently bred for reintroduction at five AZA-accredited facilities (Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, Louisville Zoo, Phoenix Zoo, Smithsonian National Zoological Park, and Toronto Zoo), building on the establishment of a successful breeding program by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and USFWS in 1986. Additionally, between 2013 and 2017, 25 AZA-accredited facilities contributed approximately \$3.6 million to field projects benefitting black-footed ferrets. These projects primarily focus on reintroduction, monitoring of reintroduced ferrets, and ecological studies focused on strengthening long-term sustainability of the population, such as those investigating the species' relationship with its prey, the black-tailed prairie dog.

The national Black-footed Ferret Recovery Implementation Team has released ferrets at 24 sites across North America. Current ferret numbers in the wild are encouraging, but more reintroduction sites are needed to fully recover the species so that it no longer requires federal protection.

AZA SAFE: Saving Animals From Extinction® was launched in 2015 to build on the AZA community's conservation successes and work alongside field partners to slow and halt the decline of animals threatened with extinction. With nineteen SAFE species programs and growing, SAFE harnesses the power of AZA professional expertise and our visitors to support priority conservation objectives outlined in existing recovery and conservation plans. Many SAFE species programs focus on species found right in our backyard, including the black-footed ferret, whooping crane, American red wolf, western pond turtle, Atlantic *Acropora* coral, and eastern indigo snake.

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums all share a deep commitment to the animals for which we care and to conserving wildlife throughout the world. Now, through SAFE, we are challenging ourselves to create a collective movement strong enough to turn the tide against a massive wave of animal extinctions. The actions we take to protect endangered species today will determine the kind of world we live in for many generations to come. Over the next 5 years, AZA members will collectively commit more than \$1 billion to this effort.

I would like to briefly mention one SAFE species, the vaquita porpoise. It is the most critically endangered cetacean in the world and can only be found in the northwestern corner of the Gulf of California in Mexico. This porpoise population is in rapid decline, with the most recent reports placing the total population between 6 and 22 animals. This is a direct result of the animals being entangled in fishing gillnets used by criminal cartels in an illegal fishery targeting totoaba, an endangered fish. Totoaba bladders, which command thousands of dollars in China, are trafficked through the United States.

What is important to note is that there is no zoo or aquarium in the world where you can see a vaquita porpoise. This amazing animal will likely only be known by our children and grandchildren in photographs. AZA members stepped up to help save this animal from extinction. They contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to projects specifically designed to

help reduce illegal fishing, and provided well over \$1 million to support the unfortunately unsuccessful VaquitaCPR rescue effort. Our members continue collaborating with U.S. and Mexican government agencies, including NOAA and the Mammal Marine Commission, NGOs in Mexico, and local communities in the Upper Gulf to do everything possible to spare the vaquita extinction. However, it looks increasingly bleak.

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums also are uniquely positioned to educate the public and inspire them to take conservation actions both locally and globally. With our reach to more than 195 million visitors annually, our members have taken the lead on many critical issues affecting endangered species including one which Congress, the federal agencies, and many states have worked to advance: combating wildlife trafficking.

In 2013, the AZA and many of our members partnered with the Wildlife Conservation Society on the 96 Elephants Campaign – an effort focused on securing a U.S. moratorium on illegal ivory; bolstering protection of African elephants; and educating the public about the link between ivory consumption and the elephant poaching crisis. Through the 96 Elephants campaign, millions of zoo and aquarium visitors took action to express their support for regulations to stop the demand for ivory here in the United States and around the world.

In 2016 the federal government did just that, by finalizing a rule to close the loopholes in the existing regulations that inadvertently enabled illegal ivory to be sold in the U.S. for decades. That rule banned all domestic ivory sales, with only very narrow and specific exemptions. Congress also passed, and President Obama signed into law, the “END Wildlife Trafficking Act,” which helps wildlife law enforcement personnel by providing them with additional tools and resources they need to apprehend, prosecute, and convict wildlife criminals. Meanwhile, AZA members have worked with their state partners to pass wildlife trafficking legislation in New York, New Jersey, California, Washington, Hawaii, and Oregon.

In 2018 the AZA acquired the Wildlife Trafficking Alliance (WTA) in a joint effort to combat wildlife trafficking around the world. In addition to SAFE, WTA offers AZA-accredited facilities another opportunity to join a broader coalition to protect animals in the wild via three main pillars:

- (1) leverage expertise and influence to strengthen legislation, regulation, policy and enforcement;
- (2) help to change individual behavior to eliminate purchasing and consumption that drives illegal trade of wildlife; and
- (3) enhance the visibility and effectiveness of AZA institutions as leaders in combatting wildlife trafficking.

Illicit wildlife trafficking is one of the top five transnational organized crimes, a multibillion-dollar illegal trade that is increasingly dominated by international criminal networks with connections to militant groups and organizations with terrorist ties. Domestically, the influx of illegally trafficked animals into the U.S. has led to increasing pressures on federal and state law enforcement agencies, Customs and Border Patrol, and port authorities to find, confiscate, and place seized wildlife specimens. Most of these seizures end in either euthanasia of the animals or

placement in AZA accredited zoos and aquariums. AZA members expend tremendous human and financial resources to accommodate these seizures. AZA looks forward to working with our federal partners and other conservation organizations to develop new solutions and funding mechanisms to address the disposition of seized wildlife. It is AZA's hope that additional support for U.S. port authorities will bolster current time and resources spent on wildlife confiscation operations.

In the past month, both the House and Senate passed legislation that would reauthorize the Multinational Species Conservation Fund (MSCF) program. This program supports public-private partnerships that conserve wild tigers, Asian and African elephants, rhinos, great apes, and marine turtles in their native habitats. Through the MSCF programs, the United States supplements the efforts of developing countries that are struggling to balance the needs of their human populations and endemic wildlife. MSCF programs help to sustain wildlife populations, address threats such as illegal poaching, reduce human-wildlife conflict, and protect essential habitat. By working with local communities, they also improve people's livelihoods, contribute to local and regional stability, and support U.S. security interests in impoverished regions. This federal program benefits AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums in their field conservation efforts and partnerships with the USFWS.

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums are connecting people with iconic species and engaging them in conservation issues that these animals face in their natural ranges. However, none of us can save these species alone. This effort requires partnerships among NGOs, Congress, federal agencies, state governments, foreign governments, private sector stakeholders, and the public. AZA and its members view the USFWS, NOAA, and the USDA as exceptional partners in these efforts, and we are striving to be even better partners to them.

Although we have made significant progress in saving endangered and threatened species, a growing body of evidence points to the disturbingly unambiguous conclusion that we are losing the war to save wild life. We are losing locally, nationally and globally. We are losing daily, monthly and yearly. Yes, there are examples of success, as I've tried to show in the examples above. But species protection, conservation, and especially recovery, require long-term effort and commitment. And as we struggle to bring back species like California condor, we are losing species, like vaquita porpoise. New challenges arise daily and the situation is only growing more complex. Ongoing work related to species recovery plans will conserve some species for future generations, but our efforts must become much bigger, bolder, and faster if we are to make a significant difference in saving wildlife and maintaining it on the landscape. Now is the time to increase our collective commitment. The AZA and its members look forward to working with Congress to assure that as a nation we are providing the funding, human resources, innovation, and especially the leadership that will be necessary to conserve wildlife at home and globally.

And we must do this, because we are losing – badly.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important matter, and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.