

Co-Chairs Cohen and Demicco,

As an avid hunter and active conservationist, I urge you and other members of the Environment Committee to OPPOSE House Bill 5104. House Bill 5104 would ban the import, possession, sale, offer for sale, or transport of six African species of wildlife—African elephant, lion, leopard, black rhinoceros, white rhinoceros, and giraffe. Adoption of this legislation will negatively impact the conservation of these species.

This legislation goes against decades of scientific research that has been compiled by wildlife experts in African nations, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the U.S. Government, and Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, among others. That research reveals that hunting generates incentives that protect habitat, reduce poaching, and encourage local stakeholders to participate in the conservation of these species.

This legislation ignores the benefits that U.S. hunters, including those from Connecticut, bring to African wildlife. African countries have repeatedly expressed their desire to maintain the flexibility to use hunting as part of their management strategies for these species. Importantly, they also want to maintain sovereignty over their wildlife resources. For each of the species listed, the healthiest and most stable populations are in countries with active hunting programs. For example, the world's largest populations of elephants and lions exist on habitat conserved as hunting areas. These hunting areas exceed the size of national parks by hundreds of thousands of square kilometers. Loss of habitat is the greatest threat facing iconic species, and hunting directly mitigates that threat through habitat conservation.

In Africa in 1895, there were fewer than 100 white rhinos. Today, according to the IUCN, there are an estimated 19,000 white rhinos, due largely to hunting programs and the conservation efforts associated with them. Similarly, sustainable, regulated hunting programs are responsible for increasing the number of black rhinos from approximately 1,000 in the 1890s to more than 5,000 today. The IUCN reports that importation restrictions on species targeted by House Bill 5104 such as the African elephant, black rhino, white rhino, and lion "could likely cause serious declines of populations."

Discouraging hunting by reducing the ability of U.S. hunters to import trophies also cripples the antipoaching programs that hunting supports. Hunting revenues fund 20% to 80% of wildlife-related law enforcement efforts in African countries. Individual hunting operators maintain their own anti-poaching teams. Moreover, hunting improves the tolerance of local communities towards dangerous game like elephants and lions. Communities share in hunting revenues and reinvest those funds in building schools and clinics, among other projects. Rural communities also benefit from the sharing of game meat.

SCI fundamentally opposes this legislation for its detrimental effects on wildlife conservation, as well as the negative impacts it will have on rural communities reliant on hunting-related tourism.

Finally, SCI opposes this legislation because it is unenforceable. Established legal precedent shows that this legislation would be preempted by section 6(f) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Should this bill be enacted, the State would likely expend both financial and personnel resources defending a law which clearly violates federal statute.

In 2016, New Jersey became the first state to pass legislation banning the importation and possession of items (including trophies) from certain African species by residents of New Jersey. When the bill was challenged by conservation organizations and hunters, the State conceded that the legislation could not be enforced against federally authorized or permitted imports. In 2016, the U.S. district court entered a judgment against the State, overturning the importation and possession ban.

Other states have recognized their inability to preempt federal law. For example, two years ago, then Governor of California Edmund G. Brown vetoed a bill which would also have prohibited the possession of lawfully imported hunting trophies of certain African species in California. In his veto message, the Governor acknowledged that the bill would have been unenforceable because it prohibited activities expressly authorized by the ESA. House Bill 5104 suffers from the same deficiencies as the New Jersey and California legislation and would also be preempted by the ESA.

SCI shares a concern for the conservation of African wildlife, but this legislation would negatively impact conservation efforts while also unfairly punishing law-abiding sportsmen and women, conservationists and taxidermists in Connecticut. SCI urges you to have faith in the African countries that are properly conserving their wildlife, including through hunting. SCI urges you to oppose House Bill 5104.

Sincerely,

Gary M. Sylvestre

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