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Open Letter to
Mr. Vitalis Chadenga
Director General
Zimbabwe National Parks and Wildlife Management Authority
Zimbabwe
natparks@africaonline.co.zw

21 May 2010

Dear Director-General,

I am writing to you in my capacity as Director of ElephantVoices, as a world authority on the behaviour, welfare and conservation of elephants and on behalf of the undersigned organisations and wildlife experts.

During the course of the last week the international media has been publishing a number of negative reports regarding the capture and imminent shipment from Zimbabwe to North Korea of wild species of animals captured in Hwange National Park. In one of the reports you are referred to as saying that the impending export of elephants and five other species (giraffes, zebras, warthog, spotted hyenas and rock hyrax) is a “business arrangement” following an application by North Korea for these animals, and that your authority is satisfied with conditions in the receiving country.

I am surprised to learn that the current capture is being organized by your offices. It was my understanding that last year your department agreed to ban the practice of elephant capture following the cases of elephant abuse that were brought to the world’s attention first by the capture and training of elephants for Shearwater Adventures and then, likewise, by Sondelani Ranch. As an elephant expert I worked closely with the ZNSPCA in both of the above-mentioned cases. When the nine remaining elephants from the Sondelani case were finally released to Hwange National Park in September 2008, ElephantVoices and other organizations commended your department for agreeing to enforce stricter welfare controls to protect those elephants already in captivity and for agreeing to halt the practice of capturing wild elephants. We believed then that this would draw a line under such practices, which would not be repeated in the future

We are, therefore, extremely disillusioned to learn that, indeed, your offices are responsible for carrying out these captures. We are particularly disappointed to hear that the animals are being captured and held in a National Park – a place that most citizens of the world would view as a place of sanctuary for animals, rather than a place of abusive treatment.

For the following reasons we, once again, request that Zimbabwe ban the practice of capturing live elephants for captive use with immediate effect:

1. The capture of wild elephants is of no conservation benefit

The IUCN issued the following clear statement opposing capture of wild elephants in 2003: *“Believing there to be no direct benefit for in situ conservation of African Elephants, the African Elephant Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission does not endorse the removal of African Elephants from the wild for any captive use.”* (Document 1)

2. Capture, separation and incarceration of elephants violates CITES requirements

Zimbabwe's elephants are listed on Appendix II of CITES. As such, the Management Authority of the State of export must satisfy two specific provisions of the Treaty. Firstly, that that any "living specimen will be so prepared and shipped as to minimize the risk of injury, damage to health or cruel treatment." (<http://www.cites.org/eng/disc/text.shtml#IV>), and;

That international trade in live elephants from Zimbabwe must be to "appropriate and acceptable destinations, as defined in Resolution Conf. 11.20".

North Korea is not a signatory to CITES but, since Zimbabwe is a long-standing and respected member of the CITES community, it is incumbent on the Government of Zimbabwe to treat North Korea *as if it were a Party to CITES* and to ensure that any shipping of live animals complies with the terms of the 'Prepared and Shipped' provision **and** the terms of the 'Appropriate and Acceptable Destination' provision.

In that regard I would like to ask whether you have been to see the proposed facilities for these animals in North Korea and against what internationally recognized criteria they were evaluated.

It is our understanding that the elephants captured are approximately 18 months of age. Elephant calves suckle until they are four years old and they have evolved to form very strong bonds with their mothers and other family members, as described below, and in the supporting documents. Indeed, newspaper reports have been quick to state that these individuals are unlikely to survive for long, and based on 40 years of demographic records, I completely agree with these claims. With the scientific knowledge we have of elephants today, the capture and separation of babies from members of their family and their lifelong confinement in zoos or circuses cannot, in any honesty, be said to "minimize the risk of injury, damage to health or cruel treatment" as required by CITES.

3. Capture and captivity are detrimental to the individual's welfare

Decades of in-depth scientific research on wild African elephants has shown that elephants are highly intelligent and have evolved extremely complex social and bonding behaviours. The capture of elephants from the wild, and specifically the removal of individual juvenile elephants from their families, has long been recognised as an unacceptable practice by elephant scientists and experts as it is highly traumatic for both the captured individuals and their remaining family members (*Document 2*). See also [Elephants captured and sold](#) on [ElephantVoices](#).

The disruption of social bonds and the life-long incarceration of elephants in zoos, safari parks and circuses are the cause of enormous suffering to individuals. Recently published and internationally recognised scientific papers concerning elephants kept in European and US zoos confirm that elephants fare very poorly in captivity. They suffer from a multitude of captivity-related diseases and conditions including tuberculosis, herpes, obesity, and reproductive problems, disorders of the feet and joints as well as psychological stress. As a consequence, the average life span of African elephants in zoos in Europe is decades shorter than in the wild (*Document 3*). The same applies to elephants in circuses (*Document 4*). Many of the elephants currently languishing in North American Zoos today originate from Zimbabwe. The majority of them are suffering from physical and psychological ill health from years of being kept in inadequate space and with insufficient social contact. North Korea does not have a good animal welfare record; these animals are destined for a life of ill health and cruelty.

4. New legislation – winds of change

Due to the enormous welfare implications for elephants there is a global movement towards stopping the practice of capturing and keeping elephants captive in this manner.

- In 2008, South Africa recognised the capture of wild elephants as an unethical practice. Following international consultations and in view of high profile lawsuits (e.g. the Tuli Case; Kwantu Judgment), the capture of elephant calves for captivity and for export to zoos and circuses, was banned (*Document 5 and 6*).

- Last year, India banned the keeping of elephants in zoos.
- Many zoos in the United States are bowing to sound science and public opinion, closing their elephant exhibits and sending their occupants to sanctuaries. Likewise, around the world circuses that exhibit elephants are facing enormous public pressure, including lawsuits.
- Finland, Bolivia and Brazil have already banned the use of elephants in circuses, as have a growing number of cities around the world. Norway intends to ban the exhibit of elephants in circuses and the issue is being considered in the United Kingdom.

5. Zimbabwe's image

Whether CITES views such exports as acceptable has little bearing on the views of an increasingly discerning public, who cares about the welfare of animals, particularly of elephants. It is important to recognize that these views should not be marginalized as those of animal rights activists and, so-called, "bunny huggers," since they are shared by numerous renowned scientists who are at the cutting edge of the study of animal emotions and cognition. Having consideration for the welfare of animals matters because we now have scientific evidence that they are capable of suffering for many of the same reasons that human beings suffer. We are, after all, animals ourselves and our capacity for anguish is imbedded in the genes that we share with other species on the planet. Because elephants are so large, so social, so intelligent and so long-lived they are particularly susceptible to abusive treatment.

As you have witnessed in recent days, news and views travel fast via the Internet and social networks. We urge you not to underestimate the impact on world opinion of the distressing sounds and imagery of elephant calves and juveniles being forcibly separated from their families, captured and then undergoing inhumane taming and training methods, and a lifetime of captivity in a country that is not known for its adherence to international standards and norms. These practices are totally unacceptable for an enlightened public and continuation is bound to lead to public petitions, campaigns, and increased negative publicity for Zimbabwe.

The introduction of a ban on the further capture of live elephants, on the other hand, is likely to generate positive publicity that would give Zimbabwe's image a boost in the international media.

We are already aware of further media interest in this issue and, when questioned, wish to represent as accurately as possible the situation which is why I would ask you as a matter of some urgency to clarify what is happening and, as I have said before, hopefully confirm that the proposed shipment of wild animals to North Korea will not go ahead and that the Government of Zimbabwe confirms its policy of not capturing elephants (and, I hope, other wild animals) for public display.

We look forward to being able to commend Zimbabwe for banning the capture and trade of elephants.

Respectfully,



Joyce Poole, PhD,

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