December 14, 2014

The Honourable Saviour Kasukuwere
Minister of Environment and Natural Resources Management
11th Floor Kaguvi Building
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Zimbabwe

Sent via email to:
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Dear Minister Kasukuwere:

We respectfully write to you as scientists, conservationists, and animal care, policy and welfare professionals to express our great concern over the capture and imminent export of more than 30 elephant calves, among other wild animals, as reported by the international media. Other reports claim that one calf has already died.

We are shocked to learn of this capture, especially given the massive international response that stopped the export of elephant calves in the past. This included a planned export to North Korea in 2010, and the completion of an export to zoos in China in 2012. Of the four wild-caught elephant calves who were exported from Zimbabwe to China in 2012, only one is alive today. This calf, currently living at the Taiyuan Zoo, is reported to be in extremely poor physical condition and suffering intense mental distress as a result of isolation.

Transferring this current group of elephants to yet another distant destination where they will be confined for the rest of their lives is wrong, and will certainly traumatize them and the herds from which they have been forcibly removed. This tragic fact is not lost on people around the world who are already protesting Zimbabwe's actions.

For the following reasons, we, the undersigned, request that Zimbabwe ban the practice of capturing live elephants and other wildlife for captive use. We further call on you to arrange for the captured elephant calves to be released back into the wild through a carefully managed process of rehabilitation.

1. The capture of wild elephants serves no conservation benefit

The IUCN issued the following clear statement in 2003 opposing the capture of wild elephants:

> "*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.*"

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 Convention. Firstly (Article IV, 2c), that any "*living specimen will be so prepared and shipped to minimize the risk of injury, damage to health or cruel treatment*" and that international trade in live elephants from Zimbabwe must be to "*appropriate and acceptable destinations, as defined in Resolution Conf. 11.20.*"

It is our understanding that the captured elephants are between 2.5 and 5 years of age. Elephant calves suckle until they are at least four years old. Elephant young have evolved to form very strong bonds with their mothers and other family members. Based on our collective expertise, we believe that the captured calves are highly likely to suffer poor health and welfare and to live shortened lives as a result of the trauma of being removed from their families.

The highly stressful capture and separation of young elephants from members of their families and their lifelong confinement in zoos or circuses in inappropriate social groups cannot be said to "minimize risk of injury, damage to health or cruel treatment" as required by CITES. This is evident in the deaths of the three elephants exported by Zimbabwe to Chinese zoos in 2012, and the poor state of the one surviving juvenile currently at the Taiyuan Zoo who is physically and psychologically suffering in the absence of his family. It is also evident from the history of 63 elephant calves exported from Zimbabwe to the U.S. in the early 1980s. These elephants were eventually sent to zoos and circuses. Almost all of them died prematurely. One of the few surviving elephants, 32-year-old Nosey, lives a miserable existence: without the company of other elephants, crippled, and forced to perform in a circus.

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

Decades of in-depth scientific research on wild African elephants show that elephants are highly intelligent and have evolved extremely complex social and bonding behaviors. The capture of elephants from the wild, and specifically the removal of individual juvenile elephants from families, has long been recognized as an unacceptable practice because it is traumatic for both the captured individuals and their remaining family members.

The disruption of social bonds and the life-long incarceration of elephants in zoos, safari parks and circuses cause enormous suffering to individuals. Internationally recognized scientific papers concerning elephants kept in European and U.S. zoos confirm that elephants fare poorly in captivity. They suffer from a multitude of captivity-related conditions including tuberculosis, herpes, obesity, reproductive disorders, diseases of the feet and joints, as well as psychological stress. As a consequence, the average life span of African elephants in zoos is decades shorter than the lifespan of their counterparts in the wild. The same disparity in lifespan is seen in elephants in circuses.

4. Zimbabwe's image

Whether Zimbabwe's CITES Management Authority views such exports as acceptable has little bearing on the views of an increasingly discerning public who care about the welfare of animals, particularly elephants. These views are shared by numerous renowned scientists worldwide.

Having consideration for the welfare of animals matters because we now have scientific evidence demonstrating that they are capable of suffering for many of the same reasons that human beings suffer. Because elephants are so large, so social and so long-lived they are particularly susceptible to abusive treatment.

We urge you not to underestimate the impact on world opinion that your highly disturbing action creates. Already, there are public petitions, campaigns and increased negative publicity for Zimbabwe. In contrast, cancellation of the elephant transfer would promote a more positive image of Zimbabwe in the international media, help to restore Zimbabwe's reputation for being a responsible custodian of its wildlife, and improve prospects for the development of responsible wildlife tourism which has the potential to generate far more income for the country than the sale of animals to foreign zoos or individuals.

In fact, there is a global movement toward stopping the capture and confinement of elephants: In 2008 South Africa banned the capture of elephant calves for captivity and export to zoos and circuses, and in 2009 India banned the keeping of elephants in zoos. Several zoos in the United States are bowing to sound science and public opinion, closing elephant exhibits and sending their occupants to sanctuaries. More than 20 countries have banned the use of elephants and other wild animals in circuses, as have a growing number of cities around the world.

The entire world is focused on Africa because of rampant poaching and fears that the illegal ivory trade is driving elephant populations toward extinction. It is a black mark on Zimbabwe that rather than doing everything it can to protect its elephants, it is instead selling them off to another country to live short and tortured lives.

It is with great urgency we request that you cancel the transfer of the more than 30 elephant calves and the other captured animals, and that you introduce a ban on the further capture of live elephants. We urge you to do all that you can to preserve and protect the great wildlife heritage of your country.

Sincerely,
Catherine Doyle, Director of Science, Research & Advocacy, The Performing Animal Welfare Society
Chris Draper, Programmes Manager (Captive Wild Animals/Science), Born Free Foundation
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Please respond to: Catherine Doyle, Director of Science, Research and Advocacy, The Performing Animal Welfare Society, cdoyle@pawsweb.org.

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