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SULi
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Specialist Group
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Iain, Sam, Maria Paz, Emma, Ricken and the whole **Avaaz** team
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Dear Avaaz Team,

AVAAZ RHINO POACHING PETITION

We write to you as the Chairs of the IUCN SSC African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG) and the IUCN CEESP/SSC Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group (SULi). The IUCN – International Union for Conservation of Nature¹ is the world's oldest and largest global environmental organization, with over 1,200 member organizations. The IUCN's Commissions, including the Species Survival Commission and Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy, of which our Specialist Groups form part, are the world's premier networks of volunteer scientists, including over 10 000 experts across the world. We provide authoritative and respected technical information and analysis on environmental issues to governments, inter-governmental bodies, NGOs, and other global stakeholders.

We are very aware of the plight facing our rhinos in Africa and Asia in response to the exponential increase in the black market price of rhino horns in South East Asia. As you quite correctly point out, this poses huge challenges for the rhino range states. However, we are also equally concerned by the mushrooming of non-government organizations and petitions supposedly in support of addressing the rhino poaching problem. Although in many cases these initiatives are laudable, our fear is that they are reactive in nature, showing limited regard or understanding for the full suite and complexity of issues at hand. In addition, campaign groups such as yours need to ensure they appreciate the complexities of conservation actions involving the trade in wildlife products, such as rhino horn, and explaining that these are highly complex by nature and not amenable to simplistic (if appealing) solutions as advocated in your petition. We also worry that, if anything, such a petition can direct the largely ill-informed public

¹ See www.iucn.org

in the wrong direction, which ultimately could harm the conservation of rhinos. Your petition is a case in point.

As background, Africa noted a total of 24,900 rhinos (20,100 white rhinos, 4,800 black rhinos) in 2010, distributed in 12 countries. South Africa alone holds 83% of the continent's rhinos, and thus should have a considerable influence in how to manage these species. It is important to stress that the success of the South African rhino recovery has come about through good conservation management by the state authorities along with the active involvement of the private wildlife sector in more recent times². Currently the private sector owns about 24% of the 20,700 South African rhino population. This largely arose through a change in legislation in the 1960s that granted ownership of wildlife to private landowners, so much so that by 2008 there were an estimated 400 private rhino owners that collectively conserved an equivalent of 22,272 km² of land – similar to the area of Kruger National Park. This would not have come about if rhinos were not sustainably managed as part of the greater wildlife industry in South Africa. The rhino population has had a net growth of 6.9% per annum, with poaching currently accounting for 2.2%, so the populations continue to grow, albeit at a slower rate. Of course, in no way should the range states be complacent in their endeavours to reduce the illegal killing of rhinos.

Your petition mentions in its opening paragraph of the background document that the European nations need to first hear from your signatories to the petition - in other words the uninformed public - rather than initially consulting those deeply involved in the conservation and protection of rhinos. We consider this an inappropriate and irresponsible call, unlikely to lead to any conservation benefit.

Your call **'for a ban on all rhino trade -- from anywhere, to anywhere'** shows limited understanding of the economic drivers that have helped fuel the successful rhino industry in South Africa. It would be extremely harmful to rhino conservation in South Africa if rhinos lost their market value and the wildlife industry was threatened. This call by AVAAZ strikes at the very heart of the successful sustainable use policies of Southern Africa's wildlife industry³, a cornerstone of IUCN philosophy. This is something we would like to think is not the principle aim of the petition. Finding sustainable options and uses for natural resources remains a central element of South Africa's national environmental legislation, as the benefits from use provide incentives for societal engagement, thereby contributing to conservation. The imperatives for greater protection of the existing rhino populations and strengthening of enforcement activities are well understood by the range states. However, if our ultimate aim is to reduce the black market price of horn, increased enforcement addresses only one side of the equation and may not be the only solution. Experience shows that international bans on trading in certain commodities, such as alcohol during the prohibition and the current war on drugs, neither curtailed the demand nor the black market prices of these items. Arguments have been advocated, primarily by the South African private sector, who collectively own more rhino than the rest of Africa combined, regarding entering some form of regulated trade in rhino horn to address the other side of the equation. Although to many this is considered intolerable, the AfRSG and SULi remain open to trying to find some lasting and sustainable solution/s to the surge in the black market price of rhino horn, because currently the range states are bearing all the cost and the poachers all the benefit. The AfRSG, SULi and all rhino range states ultimately want to have growing rhino populations as part of an economically viable wildlife industry, gaining full benefit from the species, with a reduced demand and black market price for horn,

² See Carruthers J. 2008. Wilding the farm or farming the wild? The evolution of scientific game ranching in South Africa from the 1960s to present. *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa* 63: 160-181

³ see Craigie et al.2010. Large mammal population declines in Africa's protected areas. *Biological Conservation* 143: 2221-2228 on how well the wildlife industry has performed in southern Africa compared to elsewhere in Africa

and less threat to our living rhino populations. We want the living rhinos to be worth more than dead ones, which is currently not the case. We also do not think that the responsibility to change this lies with the European Union as suggested in your petition, but the EU should rather play a supportive role to the rhino range states and the current consumer states in finding a lasting solution.

There are a number of objectives virtually everyone can agree on, namely: reduction in the number of rhinos being poached; reduction of the black market prices of rhino horn; reduction in the illegal demand for horn; further incentives for the private sector and communities to invest in rhino conservation through continued range expansion and numbers; continued rapid population growth rates of rhino numbers; and enhanced law enforcement, in particular stopping poachers BEFORE they kill rhinos. We owe it to rhinos to keep an open mind and fairly look at and evaluate the pros and cons of all options to try to, as rationally as possible, determine what we need to do to maximize the chance of meeting these conservation objectives.

In conclusion, a call for greater dialogue to find a more sustainable solution to the rhino problem would be a better approach than such a petition, as it would force the parties to reflect on the positives and negatives associated with all potential management actions associated with conserving our rhinos as part of a vibrant wildlife industry. The need to find lasting solutions remains imperative, even if they may not be in congruence with the philosophy of many armchair conservationists. We thus appeal to you to withdraw the current petition, as we suspect it will ultimately do more damage than good to conservation, and alternatively encourage active constructive debate – this is where the EU could play an important role.

Finally, we urge you to recognise that international conservation issues, particularly those involving wildlife use and trade (and therefore socio-economic and livelihood dynamics), are often highly complex, with simple solutions rarely yielding successful outcomes on the ground. These issues are only rarely amenable to the mobilisation of political pressure around an emotive plea for action.

We look forward to your response. We will be circulating this letter, and your response, around our expert networks and making it available on our websites. We encourage you to do the same.

Yours sincerely

Dr MH Knight



Chair: IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group

Dr Rosie Cooney



Chair: IUCN Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group