

Lawsuit Challenges Trump Administration's Elephant, Lion Trophy Import Decisions

Despite Trump's Tweets, New Trophy Policies Still In Effect

By [Center For Biological Diversity](#)

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Image: African elephant courtesy USFWS

The Center for Biological Diversity and Natural Resources Defense Council sued the Trump administration today for allowing U.S. hunters to import elephant and lion trophies from Zimbabwe. The lawsuit aims to protect animals and resolve confusion created by the administration's contradictory announcements in recent days.

The suit comes days after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service abruptly reversed an Obama-era ban on elephant trophy imports based on catastrophic elephant population declines. Fish and Wildlife also recently greenlighted lion trophy imports from Zimbabwe, despite the controversial killing of Cecil the Lion in Zimbabwe in 2015.

After massive public outcry, including from established Republican politicians and pundits, President Trump and Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke announced a “hold” on issuing elephant trophy import permits late Friday night. President Trump suggested on Twitter that a new big-game trophy decision would be forthcoming. Unfortunately, the new federal policies allowing imports of elephant and lion trophies — referred to as “positive enhancement findings” under the U.S. Endangered Species Act — remain in effect.

“The Trump administration must clearly and permanently halt imports of lion and elephant trophies to protect these amazing animals from extinction,” said Tanya Sanerib, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. “Trump’s abrupt backpedaling after public outcry, while appreciated, shows how arbitrary this deplorable decision was. These incredibly imperiled creatures need a lot more than vague promises.”

Today’s suit, filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, notes that the Trump administration acted arbitrarily in its rush to reverse course and open the United States to Zimbabwean lion and elephant trophies in a move that is contrary to the Endangered Species Act.

“Putting trophy imports ‘on hold’ isn’t enough,” said Elly Pepper, deputy director of Wildlife Trade for the Natural Resources Defense Council. “Elephants are in crisis now. If we don’t force the Administration to completely revoke its decision, President Trump could quietly start allowing these imports as soon as he stops facing criticism on Twitter.”

The Trump administration’s decision to lift the ban on these trophy imports relies heavily

upon Zimbabwe having the plans, resources, funds, and staff to conserve elephant and lion populations. But, as today's lawsuit notes, in a country where corruption is already a huge concern, a military coup that began Nov. 14 has cast further uncertainty on Zimbabwe's rule of law. Zimbabwe scored an abysmal 22 out of 100 on Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Perception Index.

Poaching elephants for their ivory remains a significant threat in Zimbabwe. According to aerial surveys — known as the Great Elephant Census — Zimbabwe's elephant population decreased 6 percent between 2001 and 2013, when the aerial surveys were performed. Zimbabwe's elephant population is reportedly still in decline, largely due to poaching. Zimbabwe's lion population was estimated at roughly 703 lions in 2014.

The Great Elephant Census of savannah elephants conducted over the past couple of years revealed that fewer than 400,000 savannah elephants (not including the smaller forest elephants in western-central Africa) remain across the continent. The census results also documented the loss of 140,000 elephants over seven years due to poaching. In 2016, the IUCN found lions in Africa to be vulnerable to extinction noting an estimated 43 percent decline of African lion populations over 21 years.

Studies show that trophy hunting is only a small portion of the funding all tourists, including those who do not deplete wildlife populations, provide in African countries that allow trophy hunting. Meanwhile, corruption in Zimbabwe raises serious concerns about where trophy hunters' fees really go, according to assessments by the Obama administration and a 2016 report from House Natural Resources Committee.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.5 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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