

Giraffes could be listed as an endangered species by the United States

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(CNN) — The United States is considering giving new protection to giraffes, whose numbers have dropped dramatically in recent decades.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service announced last week that it will conduct an in-depth review on whether to add the species to the list of endangered and threatened wildlife under the Endangered Species Act.

The petition to protect giraffes, which was filed by a coalition of conservation groups in April 2017, says the animals are "in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range."

"With fewer giraffes left in Africa than elephants, it is imperative that we turn our attention to these unique animals before it is too late," the petition said.

The petition says giraffes are threatened by habitat loss, drought, diseases and hunting -- both legal sport hunting and poaching.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature listed giraffes as "vulnerable" in its 2016 "Red List" of endangered species and said their populations had fallen by up to 40% over the last 30 years.

The number of giraffes in sub-Saharan Africa plunged from 163,000 in 1985 to an estimated 97,560 in 2015, according to the group.

The initial review was supposed to take 90 days, but went on for two years. Conservation groups filed a lawsuit in December over the delay.

A spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service said the lawsuit did not affect the timing of the decision.

The service will now take public comments on the scientific and commercial impact until December 31, 2020.

"The service uses the best available science to make listing decisions and the review will not be issued until after the comment period closes," she said.

If they are listed as endangered or threatened, the US Fish and Wildlife Service will write restrictions on the taking, possessing, selling or transporting of giraffes or their parts.

"One of the goals for the Endangered Species Act, if something is threatened with extinction, we want to cut off market demand for that species," said Tanya Sanerib, the international legal director at the Center for Biological Diversity, who helped write the petition.

The United States imported 3,744 giraffe trophies between 2006 and 2015, according to government data cited in the petition. Almost 40,000 giraffe specimens were imported during that time, including 21,400 bone carvings, 4,789 bones and 1,903 bone pieces, 3,008 skin pieces and 855 skins and jewelry, leather goods and other products.

Sanerib said the bones are popular for carving, knife handles and other decorative uses.

"There's a big concern that it's becoming the new ivory," she said.

Demand for meat is also driving poaching in Africa.

"Giraffes are being coveted for meat. I mean obviously it's a huge animal, if you kill a giraffe you get a lot of meat. And there's a cross-border, trans-boundary trade in giraffe meat happening in Africa," she said

Safari Club International, which promotes the freedom to hunt and also wildlife conservation, said many countries rely on the money they earn from hunters to fund their conservation efforts.

"Without offering anything in return, an ESA (Endangered Species Act) listing could reduce the revenues and incentives currently being generated by hunting. That means reduced habitat protection, less funding for anti-poaching and fewer benefits for the rural people who live side-by-side with giraffes and other wildlife," the group said. "SCI opposes the proposed listing because it is a bad bargain for the giraffe."

The National Rifle Association Hunters' Leadership Forum has also opposed the listing.