



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Division of International Conservation
Arlington, Virginia 22203



October 13, 2010

Future for Nature Foundation
Rokin 38-11012 KT Amsterdam
The Netherlands

Re: Reference for Mr. Ofir Drori

Dear Sir/Madam:

I am writing to you regarding the candidacy of Mr. Ofir Drori for the 2011 *Future for Nature Award*. I am familiar with this prestigious award, and therefore am particularly enthusiastic to offer my opinion regarding this candidate.

My position at the Division of International Conservation at the US Fish & Wildlife Service is to serve as the Chief of the Branch of the Near East, South Asia and Africa. I have been active in conservation efforts in Africa for more than 30 years, and I have worked extensively on field projects, policy and treaty negotiations, and other issues related to endangered species and protected areas. My experience has brought me close to the geographic and subject areas on which Ofir has chosen to focus his efforts. As result of my having dealt first-hand with many of the same issues as Ofir has, I feel that I can offer some insights that may be valuable to your selection process.

I first met the candidate and began working with him about eight years ago when he had just formed his organization, The Last Great Ape Organization (LAGA). My first impressions were that he was very passionate about conservation and what could or should be done in Cameroon to stem the uncontrolled and devastating illegal trade in wildlife. I also thought that he would soon learn that in a country benighted by corruption and a history of unsustainable exploitation of wildlife, that success would be elusive at best. As he was new to this kind of work, particularly in Central Africa, I thought that it was only a matter of time until he exposed some illegal activities being conducted by powerful people, and this would result in his expulsion from the country—or worse. I obviously and gratefully was wrong.

Ofir has done and is doing what no one has been able to do in the past, things that no one thought possible in Cameroon. Although fairly typical of Central Africa, Cameroon recently was considered the most corrupt country in the world. Although many politicians were embarrassed by this pronouncement, and they offered statements about how dedicated they were to change, there was little evidence. Somehow, Ofir and his colleagues were able to provide a means by which Cameroon could support concrete and effective measures to enforce the law and conduct proper and meaningful prosecutions. The impact of the success of LAGA is now widely recognized and documented. The services of this organization are now being demanded in other countries where my organization works. This is a true testament to the success of the vision of Ofir and the leadership he has provided to colleagues and collaborators.

When our program here at US Fish & Wildlife Service first began considering supporting LAGA, it was deemed a risky proposition. Unprecedented actions are usually considered so, and this was no exception. But after meeting Ofir and having extensive conversations with him and with others who know him, we decided to take a chance to see if he could deliver on his promises. He has delivered beyond reasonable expectations, and his potential to do even more is apparent. Beyond mere promises are the accomplishments that Ofir and his team have produced. These recent examples speak for themselves: almost 300 court cases for illegal wildlife exploitation activities that were successfully prosecuted; bringing Cameroon from the Dark Ages of wildlife crime prosecution to an average rate of one per week; enormous raising of consciousness of the importance to protect wildlife and to enforce laws in Central Africa and internationally; and several awards for excellence from organizations such as Interpol and the CITES Secretariat.

In essence, Ofir is doing what we all thought was impossible, and his accomplishments astound us. He is doing this work at considerable personal risk. He is by no means naïf, and his dedication is enormous despite risks. I feel that I need say nothing more to express my unreserved and enthusiastic recommendation of Ofir Drori. I am sure that he would do honor to your award, as he has to the US Fish & Wildlife Service Division of International Conservation and our Wildlife Without Borders Program. I am happy to answer any questions you may have or to offer more commentary, and I thank you for this opportunity.

Yours truly,

Richard G. Ruggiero, Ph.D.

US Fish and Wildlife Service-Division of International Conservation

Chief of the Branch of the Near East, South Asia and Africa