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Namibian Communal Conservancies: We will not be bullied

The report by Adam Cruise and Izzy Sasada on the Namibian Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) programme is based on highly unethical and illegally conducted research, the results of which were twisted to suit their agenda. This pair of journalists entered our conservancies and spoke to people without obtaining a research permit from the government or even informing our conservancy offices of their intentions. Those of us who recall speaking to them and are quoted in their report were misrepresented, as our statements were taken out of context and used to tell a story about Namibia that is untrue.

As representatives of Namibian conservancies, we hereby condemn both the methods and the outcome of Cruise and Sasada's report in the strongest possible terms. The authors and the organisations that financed this research have broken Namibian laws and shown extreme disrespect for Namibian people and their rights.

CBNRM is a critical mechanism for linking nature conservation with rural livelihoods and development needs. We therefore resent the deliberate use of the challenges we face – including widespread poverty, terrible drought conditions and human-wildlife conflict – as a means of dismissing our conservation efforts. We are the custodians of the last free-ranging black rhino population on earth; we live among dangerous wild animals that have been eradicated elsewhere; and we zone significant portions of our land for wildlife conservation. Yet in this report and others driven by the same agenda, we are unfairly judged and punished – for the sole reason that we defend our right to the sustainable use of wildlife.

The challenges associated with rural development and poverty alleviation in Africa are not limited to Namibia, yet our progressive constitution and flagship CBNRM programme have included wildlife conservation within our development goals. Many countries in the developed world like to talk about Sustainable Development Goals. In Namibia, we live Sustainable Development. From first-hand experience, we can tell you that it is not easy balancing the current, urgent needs of our people with our desire to protect wildlife for future generations. Especially when that wildlife includes dangerous wild animals like elephants that trample our crops, destroy our water points, and even threaten our lives.

The Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT), along with the support organisations that fall under the auspices of the Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organisations (NACSO) are trusted partners who assist us with overcoming these challenges. By contrast, none of the animal rights organisations that funded Cruise and Sasada's report have ever provided any assistance towards conserving elephants or other wildlife in Namibia. They therefore have no right to criticise our conservation efforts or undermine our financial viability. Without our active participation in anti-poaching patrols, human-wildlife conflict mitigation, and awareness creation within our respective communities, there would be no wildlife on

communal lands in Namibia. Yet the eradication of wildlife appears to be a desirable outcome for Cruise and Sasada and the organisations that funded their illegal activities.

Many of the social problems highlighted in their report are beyond the scope of communal conservancies, or beyond our ability to control. Nonetheless, as community-based institutions, we have an important role to play in bringing our members' concerns to the attention of government and other stakeholders. While we cannot eliminate all social problems on our own, we aim to use the limited budgets we have to create tangible benefits for our communities. Cruise and Sasada dismiss these benefits as being unworthy of consideration, yet they do not offer alternative or better forms of income that we could use to increase member benefits. It is clear that they have no interest in improving the lives of the people they interviewed, but rather seek to further impoverish them.

While in Namibia, Cruise and Sasada used trickery and deceit to obtain their interviews, and having stolen our words without our consent they are using their report to bully us into submission. But we will stand by our goal of sustainable rural development; we are proud of our conservation achievements. We remain the rightful custodians of free-ranging wildlife on communal lands and we will continue to expand our natural resource-based industries to increase benefit flows to our members. African people have been denigrated, misused and misrepresented for far too long for us to accept more of this appalling treatment at the hand of foreigners. We will not be bullied.

Signed by:

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Stein Katupa – Secretary-General of the Kunene Regional Community Conservancy Association

Brisetha Hendricks – Chairperson of the Kunene South Conservancy Association

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