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Government of Sint Maarten
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Sint Maarten

Via email: [REDACTED]

February 2nd, 2023

Dear Minister Doran,

We the undersigned, representing experts in the field of primatology, animal welfare, rescue, and rehabilitation urge you to reconsider reported plans to use culling to control the population of green monkeys (*Chlorocebus sabaeus*) resident on Sint Maarten. We recommend that, instead, the Sint Maarten Government adopts a sterilization program which will provide a permanent, yet humane, solution for the monkey population. We are standing ready to provide support, training, and expertise to facilitate an effective sterilization program and would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with your staff at your earliest opportunity.

Green Monkey Social Behavior

Green monkeys are complex, social animals who form strong family and friendship bonds which last a lifetime. They live in groups of 10 - 50 individuals in strict hierarchies where each individual monkey understands their place and adheres to social and behavioral norms. The monkeys have long childhoods, with females remaining within their matriarchal group for their lifetime and males dispersing only when they reach adolescence. Green monkeys are thought to possess the rudiments of language, that is, vocal communication through an intricate system of alarm calls that vary greatly depending on the different types of threats to the community. For example, there are distinct predator-specific calls to warn of invading leopards, snakes and eagles. The foregoing information is important because it demonstrates that green monkeys are individuals who form part of their own societies, and who place value on their own relationships and safety.

Population Growth

While we recognize that the monkeys are a non-native species on Sint Maarten, the report commissioned by your government, and written by the Nature Foundation, confirms that the first sightings of free-living monkeys on the island date back to the early 1970s, representing more than 50 years of co-existence with human populations. The report furthermore states that it is increasing population numbers, rather than the current population, that is most cause for concern. This is demonstrated in the following statements taken from the Monkey Management Proposal:

*“The invasive vervet monkey (*Chlorocebus pygerythrus*) population will continue to grow if no measures are taken”*

“If the vervet monkey population continues to increase uncontrolled, the native and transient bird populations are likely to decrease.”

“With the current population posed to spike dramatically in the next few years, St. Maarten’s food security is also under threat.”

The Nature Foundation report then goes on to erroneously state that the green monkey population could double within one year; something that would be impossible given what we know about green monkey gestation periods and inter-birth intervals and shows a disturbing lack of understanding of primate behavior and reproduction. Research suggest that females of breeding age have the potential to give birth to one baby every 1-2 years. Assuming there is a relatively even male/female split in the monkey population on the island, even if every single female were of breeding age, every female fell pregnant in the same 1–2-year period, every birth was successful, and every baby survived, this would represent a maximum population growth of between 25% - 50% over the course of a year. This too would be highly unlikely when factoring in other variables such as social hierarchies influencing mating patterns, the number of non-breeding age females, failed pregnancies, infant mortality, existing infant care, and deaths in the colony.

Given that the report states that the first wild monkeys were seen on Sint Maarten in the 1970s, it is also clear that the simple reality of the situation does not support the claim that the population could double from one year to the next as that would have placed numbers in the billions by the turn of the century if the founder population was based on just one pair of breeding monkeys. We know this is not the case.

We do not suggest inaction, but rather oppose the drastic proposals for killing as a means to manage the population. We believe that a properly managed sterilization program will effectively and permanently address long-term concerns of growing populations of the species, while recognizing the value of the lives of the individual members of the current population, whose existence on the island is no fault of their own.

Cost of Sterilization

The Nature Foundation report suggests that the cost of sterilization would be five times that of culling, although we could not find details to explain this claim in either the report or the proposal. If the government was willing to work with us and our extensive network of primate experts, we already have veterinarians standing by and offering to volunteer their time to sterilize the monkeys, saving the government money and, most importantly, saving the monkeys’ lives. We would welcome the opportunity to see the Nature Foundation’s cost analysis for sterilization and be given the opportunity to provide alternatives based on our expert experience, and the availability of volunteer veterinary and project support staff. We also believe that it may be possible to deliver the sterilization program in a shorter timeframe than the proposed three-year cull proposal, if census data is accurate.

Flawed Public Survey

The Nature Foundation’s report states that the pros and cons of each option (inaction, eradication, and sterilization) were presented to the survey respondents. We have already established that the foundational claim in the report that population could spike by 100% in one year is fundamentally flawed. We also believe that the claim that sterilization will cost five times more than eradication is

unsubstantiated, yet it was included as fact in the survey. Finally, the survey included “cons” such as “risk of failure” in the sterilization option, but not in the eradication option, while the risk of failure is arguably equal in both cases as both rely on trapping the monkeys to either kill or sterilize. As such, we believe that the respondents to the survey were provided with incorrect information upon which to base their decision.

In addition to concerns over the information provided by the survey, we noted that the Nature Foundation stated that 72% of respondents were involved in agriculture. Arguably, those involved in agriculture will have a biased view of the monkeys and be more likely to favor their eradication. According to figures published by the CIA, agricultural product makes up just 1% of the country’s GDP while over 85% of the population is employed within the tourism industry. If 72% of respondents self-identified as being involved in agriculture, this suggests that the respondent pool for the survey was not representative of the overall population of Sint Maarten and was unlikely to therefore provide a true picture of public opinion. Given that there was only a very small majority of respondents in favor of eradication (55% in favor of killing vs 45% in favor of no action or sterilization), the information upon which the survey was based was arguably incorrect, and the respondent pool largely comprised those involved in agriculture, we do not believe that the results of the survey should be considered conclusive.

Eradication is Not Humane

In addition to our overall opposition to the culling of the green monkey population, it would be remiss not to highlight our concerns over claims that the current proposal would deliver humane outcomes. As recognized in the Nature Foundation’s plan, the killing of individual troop members – irrespective of whether that killing is carried out in a theoretically humane manner - will have widespread impacts upon the established hierarchy of the populations. This includes impacting young monkeys still reliant on parents. While the proposal suggests that camera traps will be used to understand troop hierarchies and to target lower ranking members of the troop, we do not believe that any meaningful understanding of troop hierarchy is possible in the timeframe that is being proposed. Watching camera traps for “several days” will not provide a meaningful understanding of troop dynamics and there is no way to guarantee that welfare impacts are not experienced by remaining troop members when individuals are removed indiscriminately.

Collaboration with French Saint Martin

Both the proposal and the report produced by the Nature Foundation references the need to liaise with French Saint Martin in this project yet there is no indication that this liaison has been established. News reports suggested that meetings were planned but had not yet been carried out. We cannot stress enough the need for a whole-island approach to this issue and, if given the opportunity, we would welcome the chance to work with both sides of the island on an effective sterilization program.

Public Opinion

Finally, it was noted in the Nature Foundation report that close to half the respondents were opposed to the eradication of the monkeys, despite the information provided as part of the survey being skewed towards eradication as the preferred option and most respondents being involved in agriculture. This, in addition to wider public opinion, will likely impact public perception of Sint Maarten’s governance and the island as a tourist destination. We are aware that there has already been backlash against the

proposed cull as it has been covered in the international press. This opposition will only increase if the eradication program were to go ahead. If Sint Maarten chooses instead to opt for sterilization of the monkeys, it can lead the way as a pioneer in compassionate wildlife control. This will not go unnoticed by the international community.

For the reasons outlined above, we believe the information upon which the Sint Maarten government has based its reported decision to cull the green monkeys is fundamentally flawed. Among our ranks, we have the staff and skills to assess the current situation and support the government in delivering a successful sterilization program, while working with you to mitigate short- and medium-term issues caused by the monkeys. Not only this, but we are willing to provide training opportunities for authorities on neighboring territories dealing with similar non-native monkey populations. In this way, Sint Maarten could lead the way on humane primate population management in the Caribbean region.

We would be grateful if you would consider postponing plans to cull the animals and working with us to explore truly humane alternatives. We firmly believe that all non-lethal solutions should be thoroughly investigated, assessed, and exhausted before any final decision is made which authorizes lethal control. We would be grateful for the opportunity for a small number of us to meet with you virtually to discuss how we may be able to support you. You can contact us using the details below.

We hope to hear from you soon.

Yours sincerely.

Dr. Liz Tyson-Griffin, Programs Director, **Born Free USA**

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