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The Proposed Serengeti Commercial Road

According to articles in the local press and a statement from the Communications Officer of Tanzania National Parks, the Tanzanian Government is planning to build a commercial road cutting directly through the Serengeti wilderness, which completely bisects the path of the world famous annual wildebeest and zebra migration comprised of nearly 2 million animals. These wilderness areas are a critical habitat for endangered species like rhinos and wild dogs and with many sound reasons the Serengeti National Park Management Plan allows no commercial roads at all in this area.

There is no doubt that infrastructure is needed to help connect farmers to markets, to link communities and encourage commerce and trade in the country. Looking only at the map, the proposed road through northern Serengeti seems to make sense, as it is the shortest line between existing population centres surrounding Serengeti. But we sincerely believe that the road will have disastrous effects on the entire ecosystem. The northern parts of the Serengeti and the adjacent Masai Mara are critical for the wildebeest and zebra migration during the dry season, as it is the only permanent year-round water source for these herds. Recent calculations show that if wildebeest were to be cut off from these critical dry season areas, the population would likely decline from 1.3 million animals to about 200,000 (meaning a collapse to far less than a quarter of its current population and most likely the end of the great migration).

Commercial roads in high value protected areas have proved a disaster all over the world and UNESCO is very strongly recommending that no through roads should lead through any National Park or World Heritage Site.

The planned commercial road will become a major link between East African ports like Mombasa, Dar es Salaam or Tanga and the fast developing Central African countries. With trade growth rates rising immensely in Africa, transport will significantly increase within the next few years causing hundreds of heavy trucks to cross the Serengeti every day. Furthermore, the road bisects an area with the highest concentration of

large mammals in the world, making it evident that fencing would be needed to avoid damage to vehicles and loss of human lives caused by accidents with wildlife. Such fencing would truly mean the end of the migration as wildebeest, zebras, eland and elephant could no longer reach their only water source during the dry season, the Mara River, and thus would die at the fence-line. Similarly, Botswana has already lost its wildebeest and zebra migration due to such fences. And in Canada, the elk migration in Banff National Park was also compromised because of a dissecting road. These areas are not isolated examples, roads have caused similar destruction in many pristine wilderness areas across the globe.

Areas with high traffic show a significant increase in the number of road kills. This may not threaten large well-established populations of animals, but it can have huge consequences for rare or threatened species. Even a marginal increase in mortality rates for animals such as cheetah which already suffer 90% cub mortality could turn stable populations into a decline.

The transport of goods (particularly livestock) on major roads is a prime vector for diseases such as Newcastle's disease, brucellosis, canine distemper, trypanosomiasis, African swine fever and several others. Rinderpest for example is transmitted via cattle to wildebeest and was responsible for at least an 85% reduction in the wildebeest population prior to 1958.

Many of these diseases readily cross taxonomic boundaries which raises serious concerns for livestock-wildlife disease transmission. These diseases already pass from livestock at the borders of the National Park to wildlife within the Serengeti and an increase in the transmission rates could have serious consequences.

Furthermore, the road would also allow invasive plants to spread easily into the Serengeti ecosystem, as several invasive plant species including Chromolaena, Mexican Marigold, Opuntia and others invade new areas along road verges. This would also cause serious negative effects for biodiversity and ecosystem function.

Apart from these natural threats, increasing traffic and easier access to critical areas could lead to increased poaching rates by well-organised gangs, as observed in many wilderness areas all around the world.

The entire Serengeti will change into a completely different landscape holding only a fraction of its species and losing its world-class tourism potential and its status as the world's most famous National Park - an immense backlash against the goodwill and conservation achievements of Tanzania.

The loss of the Great Serengeti Migration – the last of its kind in the world - would mean the end of Tanzania's priceless natural and national heritage, the end of the Serengeti as an iconic World Heritage Site and also a significant decline in tourism in the Serengeti and in the neighbouring Masai Mara Reserve in Kenya.

Alternative Scenario

There is an alternative that could better fulfil the development and economic goals for this area. This alternative is to bypass the Serengeti around the south by building a tarmac connection from Karatu to join the existing Shinyanga - Musoma Road. This alternative road system has been surveyed by the government already and would serve five times as many people as the planned Northern road and fulfil the same needs for linking major regional centres.

More importantly, this second option would simultaneously preserve the iconic beauty of the Serengeti National Park. We are hopeful that a solution such as this can be found to satisfy all parties.

In a world where resources become scarcer by the day, environmental catastrophes shake nations. Our most treasured areas are vanishing rapidly and wilderness is becoming an even more valuable asset. With a large percentage of its land area protected, Tanzania is one of the world leaders in biodiversity conservation. Future generations will not ask what the technological advances of our time were but who saved the majestic wild places that make our planet so special. Serengeti, a World Heritage Site, the epitome for wilderness, and biodiversity, an ecological and economical success should not be sacrificed for short-term infrastructure projects when reasonable alternatives exist.

We are convinced that the leaders and people of Tanzania will do nothing that could destroy the iconic Serengeti or damage such a treasure beyond repair. If made aware of the negative impact such a road could have on the Serengeti, the Tourism industry and the reputation of the country as a world leader in conservation we have no doubt that the Government will wisely guide Tanzania into a future where people are continuing to treasure the Serengeti as an exceptional natural and national heritage.

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