

THE DEBATE ON ELEPHANT CULLING IN SOUTH AFRICA

- AN OVERVIEW





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The purpose of this publication is to provide an overview of the International Fund for Animal Welfare's (IFAW) views with respect to the ongoing debate around elephant culling in the Kruger National Park.

Message from Fred O'Regan, President and CEO IFAW

Sometime in the next few months a decision will be taken on the future of thousands of elephants in South Africa's world famous national park, the Kruger National Park (KNP).

Already South African National Parks (SANParks), the custodians of the KNP, have put a proposal to the Government that includes culling as a way of controlling elephant populations in the park.

IFAW believes that culling is a cruel, unethical and scientifically unsound practice that does not consider the welfare implications to elephant society as a whole.

Along with many other parties – from some of the world's most eminent elephant biologists and other animal welfare groups – IFAW believes SANParks' proposal to be premature and shortsighted, and one that does not consider alternative viewpoints on the issue.

This document provides an overview of IFAW's opinions and our conclusion (with many others) that far more research into the KNP's elephant population is required before an informed decision can be made.



Fred O'Regan
CEO and President IFAW

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2005 South African National Parks (SANParks) presented their *Report on the Elephant Management Strategy* to the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism recommending that culling be approved as one of several methods of controlling elephant populations in the Kruger National Park (KNP) and elsewhere.

All interested parties were invited by Minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk to make further submissions on the issue before the compilation by his Department (of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) of a draft set of Norms and Standards which will form the basis of elephant management and policy in South Africa.

This document is scheduled to be published towards the end of 2005 and further comment is invited thereafter. A final set of Norms and Standards are expected to be published before the end of the first quarter of 2006.

The Norms and Standards will be adapted for specific circumstances in other national, provincial and private parks.

Elephant culling in the KNP was suspended in 1995 partially due to a change in management concepts and partially in response to high levels of international and local pressure from groups and individuals opposed to the practice.

Since then the elephant populations in the KNP and in the approximately 80 other national parks, provincial, and private reserves have continued to increase.

Prior to 1995 the population in the KNP was maintained at around 7,500 with a few hundred animals occurring in Addo Elephant National Park.

Today South Africa has a total elephant population of about 17,000, of which about 12,500 occur in the KNP and about 1,500 - 2,000 in the private reserves along the western border of the Park. The balance are to be found in provincial parks, other national parks and private reserves other than those on the KNP's western border. There are free ranging elephants in seven of South Africa's nine provinces and they are absent only from Free State and Northern Cape.

Overview

This document is intended to serve as a quick overview for government officials, politicians, decision makers and other interested parties dealing with the issue of elephant population management. It outlines the status of the debate at present and highlights a number of inconsistencies in the arguments put forward by SANParks and others in favour of a resumption of culling.

It also emphasises that the views of scientists, groups and individuals opposed to culling have not been given adequate recognition in the SANParks' report, entitled *Report on the Elephant Management Strategy*, and how certain aspects of the debate about elephants and biodiversity have been put forward as "fact" but, in reality, are not facts at all. SANParks and other official documentation and public comments also sometimes create an impression that there is consensus on specific issues when there is not.

One small but illustrative example - others will be examined in greater depth later in this document - appears in a press release entitled 'Fact Sheet: Elephant Management Plan' issued by DEAT on 20 September 2005 which states "By all accounts, elephant populations in national parks have now increased to the extent that biodiversity is threatened."

In using the phrase "by all accounts" the press release creates the impression that there is broad and recognised agreement on the issue when, in reality, there is no such consensus. Statements such as this are often unquestioningly repeated as fact in the media.

The views of animal welfare supporters and those of animal rights supporters are sometimes incorrectly lumped together as representing one "faction" further skewing the debate. These and other inaccuracies and misperceptions go a long way towards muddling the issue.

The document will also draw together a timeline and details of conferences and meetings on the elephant culling issue and includes IFAW's viewpoint.

Decision makers

Those entrusted with making decisions on the future management of South Africa's elephants have a tough job. The committee appointed by DEAT to draw up the Norms and Standards must not only look at the divergent views on the issue but also the reasons and background as to why these views exist.

They need to consider a wide range of scientific research, the views of managers and others who support culling, and, at the same time, understand the stance of those who promote animal welfare or animal rights considerations. Not least, they have to consider the opinions of all citizens of this country and remember that the KNP and the elephants that live there are national assets which belong to all South Africans, irrespective of their financial status or political standing.

Additionally the decision makers will need to remember that South Africa's role as a custodian of the environment will be judged worldwide by how the KNP deals with this complex issue. Protected areas are national assets but are also vital links in the global chain of dwindling wildlife areas.

Scientists themselves usually agree that ecosystems are complex and continually changing and that we have a limited understanding of how they function. Similarly, political and social norms also change and later generations are often appalled at what has been done to the environment in the past in the name of wildlife management.

The decision makers need to base their decisions on comprehensive scientific evidence backed by a thorough understanding of the norms and requirements. Poorly considered decisions made without adequate scientific backing will leave future generations aghast at our shallowness.

This document is intended to contribute to the awareness of all involved in the debate in the hope that those future generations will be able to truthfully acknowledge that all viewpoints were heard.

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Few other aspects of wildlife management are more widely or heatedly debated than that of the management of elephant populations. The issue is also strongly politicised with the physical needs of communities living near parks playing an increasingly significant role in the considerations of managers and politicians.

Elephants are not only a keystone species, playing extremely important ecological roles, but are flagships for conservation too.

They are extremely popular amongst visitors to protected areas and thus play a considerable role in the economically important tourism industry. More than 1,3-million people visit the KNP annually and last year revenue from tourism exceeded that of gold mining earning for the first time in South Africa's history. Some R47,8-billion (US\$7,35-billion) was earned from tourism, R15-billion (US\$2,3-billion) more than that from gold exports.

Part of the attraction of elephants rests in the fact that they are extremely intelligent and their sophisticated social interactions extend far beyond the level of the family group.

Their brains, and those of all mammals including humans, share common systems for regulating fundamental developmental processes such as fear, attachment, maternal behaviour, and other social interactions.

Population

South Africa has not always boasted an abundance of elephants.

By 1900 hunting had reduced the elephant population to such a low level that rangers in what is now the KNP were surprised when a few elephants were spotted in the Olifants River valley in 1905.

At that time there were very few elephants elsewhere in South Africa.

A small number of elephants regularly moved between South Africa and Mozambique in the area now known as the Tembe Elephant Park in northern KwaZulu-Natal and a few animals lived in the Knysna forests. Occasionally elephants crossed the Limpopo River from neighbouring Botswana and Zimbabwe (then known as Bechuanaland and Rhodesia).

Under the shelter of better protection the population slowly increased and by the mid 1960's the population in the KNP had increased to the point where the managers of the day felt that population reduction was necessary.

In the late 1980's KNP veterinarians and scientists developed techniques that enabled the safe translocation of elephants and today there are reintroduced populations in more than 80 national, provincial and private reserves.

South Africa is one of the few countries in Africa where wildlife is privately owned and it also differs from other African elephant range states in that all major parks are fenced.

3. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

There has been a consistent entrenchment of the perception among the public that there is an overpopulation of elephants in the KNP and that the carrying capacity of the park should be maintained at around 7,500. These constantly repeated misconceptions distort the debate about culling and the perceived impact elephants have on biodiversity.

Dr Michelle Henley, a participant in the "Elephants Alive" conference held in Johannesburg in July 2005 argues that the perpetuation of these misconceptions is due to poor communication by KNP officials.

"While the concept of a static carrying capacity within a dynamic environment has no scientific basis the idea that the KNP can only support a population of 7,000 elephants has nevertheless become deeply entrenched in the minds of the general public," Dr Henley points out in a paper entitled *Considering More than Elephants*. "I would like to express my concern about the ineffective means by which the refined KNP management policy has been conveyed to the broader public through the media. If the public is to participate in the debate then the management of elephants cannot be based on the perceived overpopulation fed by an uninformed press."

Dr Henley cautions scientists and managers involved with the issue of elephant management to carefully choose their words when dealing with the public and to avoid using conclusive or definitive statements that have not been scientifically validated.

"These include statements such as 'There is an overpopulation of elephants' or 'Elephants have exceeded their carrying capacity'," Dr Henley adds.

"The majority of scientists do not agree with these perceptions while only 19 per cent of media releases dealing specifically with the culling debate leading up to the workshop have avoided this pitfall."

The media shows regular interest in the issue and on a number of occasions over the past 10 years has reported that SANParks intended resuming culling but until recently these reports were denied. SANParks and KNP officials have regularly crossed swords with the media when the issue of culling is discussed.

Another aspect of public interest in the debate is the views of those communities who live on the western boundary of the park. Writing soon after South Africa's first democratic election in 1994 author Jane Carruthers pointed out in her book *Kruger National Park, a Social and Political History* that "...for a large proportion of Africans, the KNP - far from being a symbol of national pride - is perceived to be part of a governmental structure from which they have been systematically excluded."

In an attempt to redress the wrongs of the past SANParks have consulted extensively with these communities and elephants have become central to these discussions, to the extent, some would argue, where elephants are being used as pawns in a trade-off between parks authorities and communities.

Tourism

In discussing possible public responses to the recommendation that culling be resumed SANParks state in *Report on the Elephant Management Strategy* "...that possible risks to tourism were voiced by a small number of participants in the consultation process".

In March 2005 the Sunday Independent reported that several animal welfare and rights organisations, including IFAW, with millions of supporters worldwide had warned that a decision to cull elephants may discourage visitors from coming to South Africa.

"If they go ahead [with culling] it will be another black-eye for the South African government's international reputation," Dr John Grandy, senior vice-president in charge of wildlife at the Humane Society International (HSI) told the Sunday Independent. HSI is an arm of the Human Society of the United States (HSUS) and has a membership of more than 8,6-million.

The SANParks report added that attempts to gauge public response were speculative and that "...certainly there was no tourism boycott of the KNP during the period when elephant culling was conducted."

This statement is somewhat perplexing in that South Africa was considered an international pariah because of apartheid during most of the period when culling took place and visitors willing to visit in the face of human rights abuses, including state sponsored murder of activists and detention without trial would have been unlikely to be concerned about elephants being shot. Additionally, the statement ignores the rapid growth of alternative views about how humans should treat animals.



Animal Welfare and Animal Rights

Some officials, supporters of culling, and pro-hunting groups regularly view animal welfare and animal rights groups as one or use the names interchangeably. This distorts rational debate about culling because while supporters of these groups often agree, they sometimes contribute widely differing viewpoints to debates.

Both movements have grown considerably in recent years and have large support bases worldwide.

According to Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia, animal welfare "...is the viewpoint that some or all animals, especially those under human care, should be treated in such a way that they do not suffer unnecessarily. This position usually focuses on the morality of human action (or inaction), as opposed to making deeper political or philosophical claims about the status of animals, as is the case for animal rights viewpoint. For this reason animal welfare organisations may use the word *humane* in their title or position statements."

"Animal rights, or animal liberation, are the movements to protect non-human animals from being exploited by humans," the encyclopedia states.

"To this end the movement advocates that many animals be given legal rights to protect their basic interests."

Culling history

Although culling in the KNP had been discussed as early as the 1940's the first formal meeting to explore the issue was held in 1965. The then National Parks Board convened a meeting in Pretoria to discuss controlling elephant populations and the board approved a motion in favour of culling to limit the impact of elephants on vegetation.

As a result of this decision some 16,210 elephants were culled between 1966 and 1994. In 1983 and 1984 alone 1,356 and 1,377 elephants were killed respectively, although most annual culls were smaller.

Initially animals were shot with rifles but later the drug succinylcholine chloride, a powerful muscle relaxant, was used until the practice was suspended in 1995.

When used in large doses on elephants the drug, commonly known as Scoline, causes paralysis and the collapse of the respiratory muscles. After darting the paralysed animal remains fully conscious until it dies, a process which can take several minutes. In cases where the drug failed to take effect properly some animals had to be shot.

The KNP persisted in the use of Scoline despite much evidence that it subjected the animals to undue mental cruelty.

Professor John Hanks, an internationally respected conservationist who ran a research operation in the South Luangwa National Park in Zambia, wrote that culling operations there were "extremely distasteful" and that the use of Scoline was soon abandoned in favour of rifles.

"Early in 1968, following a reappraisal of the existing culling technique it was realised that darting with succinylcholine chloride was not the best method and it was certainly not the most humane," Professor Hanks wrote in his book *A Struggle for Survival - The Elephant problem* (Struik, 1979)

Translocation

In the late 1980's scientists and veterinarians in the KNP developed methods of translocating elephants and since then more than 1,600 elephants have been moved to other national parks, provincial reserves and private reserves across South Africa. Some animals were exported to neighbouring countries or to zoos and safari parks overseas.

Very few animals are translocated from the KNP at present because of a shortage of suitable habitat in South Africa.

CITES

South Africa is a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). In 2002 the South African elephant population was down-listed to CITES Appendix II which allowed a conditional once-off sale of ivory stockpiles. The sale has yet to proceed, however, as a number of important conditions have yet to be met, e.g. the CITES Standing Committee (its executive arm charged with making the decision) has not yet been convinced that satisfactory controls exist in both the exporting as well as prospective importing countries.



Timeline of public debate and SANParks internal workshops

The decision to suspend culling and review elephant management policy was announced by SANParks at a public meeting in Midrand, Gauteng, on 4 May 1995.

A number of workshops and conferences on elephant management practices have been held since 1995 and the most important are listed below.

Although the conferences and workshops have been attended by a number of important stakeholders IFAW believes the meetings have not adequately provided for follow-ups. While the workshops were forums for presentations and expressions of position they were inadequate in the context of this debate.

The following workshops dealing with the issue of elephant culling and impacts on biodiversity have been organised by SANParks over the past decade.

Workshops and conferences related to culling arranged by SANParks

8 February, 1995

A workshop, held in conjunction with IUCN (International Conservation Union) Elephant Specialist Group, was held at Skukuza in the KNP to review elephant management policy.

4 May 1995

A public debate on the issue was held at Midrand. SANParks gave an undertaking to suspend elephant culling and to review its elephant management policies.

30 October 1996

Another workshop was held at Skukuza where it was established in principle that elephant populations should not be maintained at a stable number but rather be allowed to fluctuate.

12 November 1996

The resolutions of the Skukuza meeting were presented at a public debate in Midrand.

11-13 February 1997

A scientific workshop was held in the KNP to discuss the maintenance of biodiversity in the park.

31 October 1998

The new elephant management policy was posted on the Internet and presented at a public meeting in Nelspruit.

1999

The new elephant management policy was published in the scientific journal *Koedoe* (Whyte et al. 1996) *Koedoe* 111-132.

19-21 October 2004

The Great Elephant Indaba was held at Berg-en-Dal in the KNP.

2003-2004

Consultation with communities in South Africa and Mozambique on the establishment of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park.

15-17 March 2005

A scientific workshop entitled *Elephants and Biodiversity - a Synthesis of Current understanding of the Role and management of Elephants in Savanna Ecosystems* was held at Luipardskloof near Pretoria.

2005

Consultation with communities living near the KNP.

Additional conferences

17 Sept 2004

The Elephant Managers & Owners Association (EMOA) and North West Parks hosted an Elephant Symposium at Pilanesberg National Park.

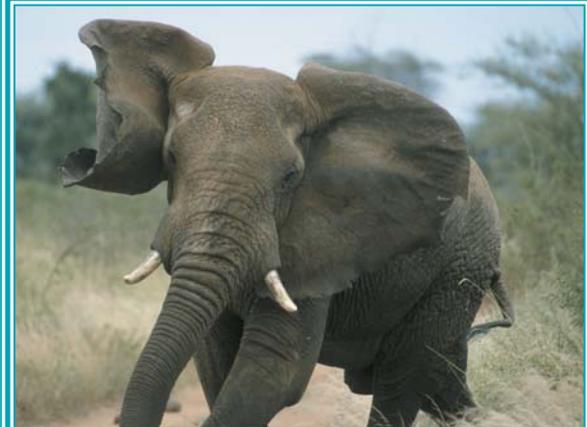
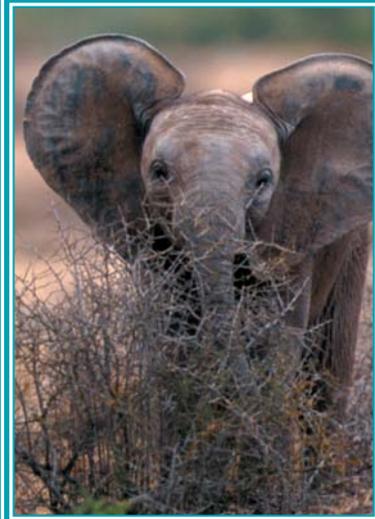
May 2005

African Range State consultation meeting held under the auspices of the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

July 2005

Care for the Wild International, Xwe African Wildlife and Justice for Animals hosted "Elephants Alive" a conference at the University of the Witwatersrand. SANParks declined to attend.

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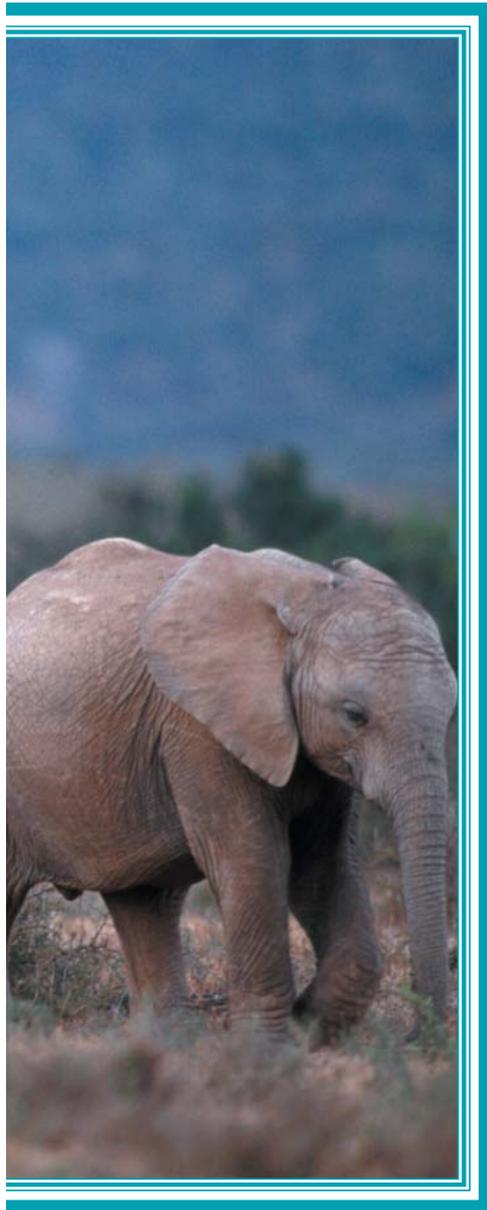
4. INDEQUACIES OF THE SANPARKS' REPORT

This 49-page report sets out SANParks' argument supporting the resumption of culling as a management tool for KNP elephants. In the report SANParks argue that their role is to protect biodiversity, to promote the sustainable utilisation of resources and advocate the use of adaptive management - "...learning by doing". Citing the precautionary principle, which is open to wide interpretation they say that they believe it is necessary to cull in order to prevent any "possible" biodiversity loss caused by elephants.

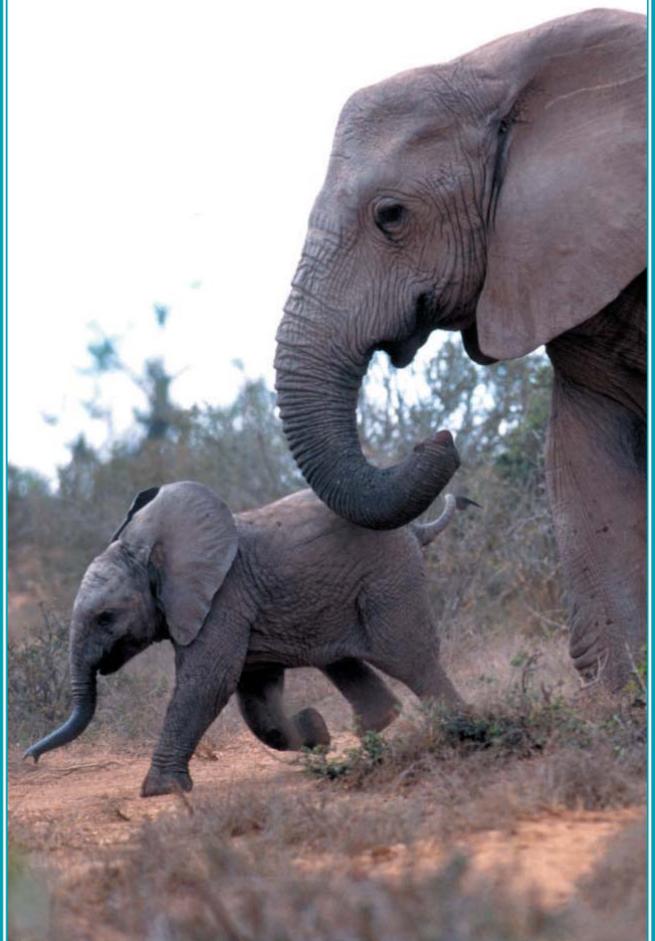
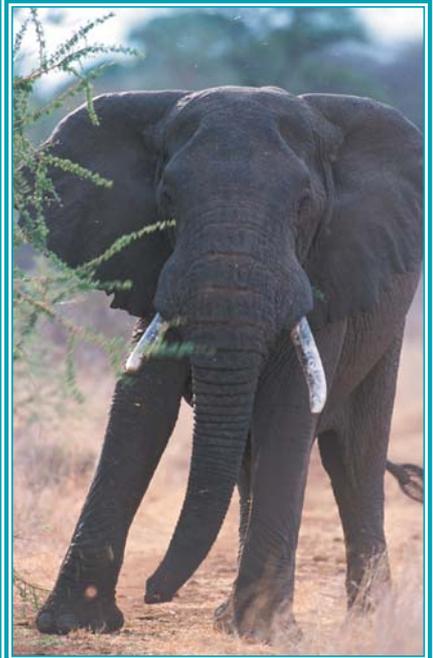
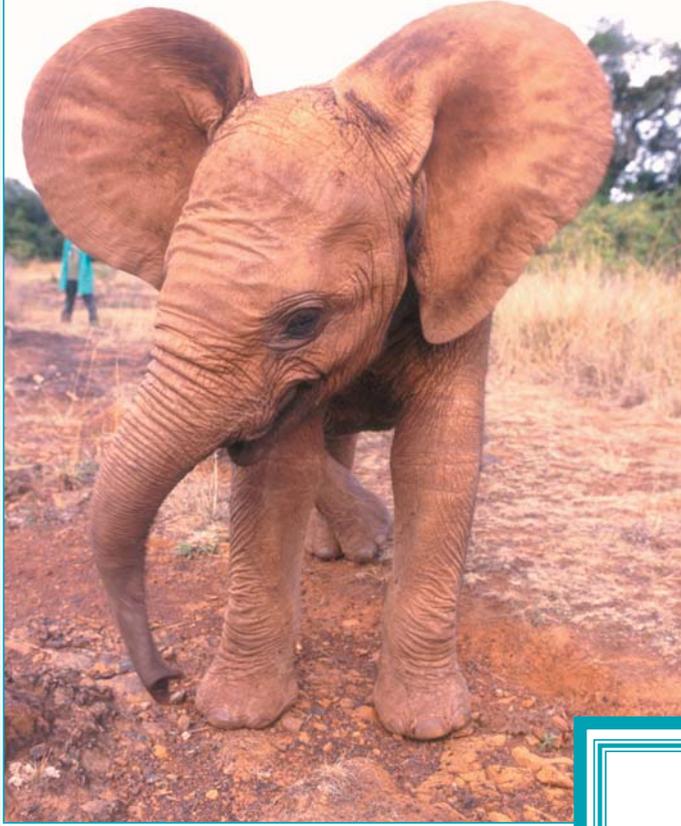
They also say that it is necessary to reduce elephant numbers to limit human-wildlife conflict on the borders of the park.

SANParks indicates that South Africa has run out of space to relocate elephants to and that contraception, while effective in small populations, is too costly to be considered for use in the KNP and will also not bring about a rapid reduction in population in the short-term.

SANParks also reports that although the creation of the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park has resulted in the provision of more land for wildlife, attempts to move elephants across the South Africa-Mozambique border have met with little success. Some of the first elephants relocated to Mozambique simply walked back into the KNP and although some sections of the fence has been removed and small numbers of animals do move across the border it is not sufficient to make any difference to densities in the KNP. An additional problem is that the Mozambican government has discouraged the immediate movement of large numbers of elephants because of concerns raised by communities living along the Shingwedzi River.



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Scientific background

The report is somewhat contradictory in several aspects. While it purports to provide the Minister with a convincing argument that adequate research has been undertaken to warrant culling it also states that while science should inform conservation decisions it is purely a value judgment that has to be made.

"Although science should inform conservation decision making the decisions are ultimately based on value systems," the report states. "The divergence of views on elephant management arises primarily from completely different values held by different stakeholders. Scientific information cannot resolve these value differences. It is up to decision makers to set the value systems that should be upheld in national protected areas".

This seems to fly in the face of SANParks own criticism of calls for the 1995 moratorium which they said was lacking in adequate scientific support and required further research.

SANParks also attempts to absolve itself of the duty of providing proof that elephants are damaging biodiversity.

"It is appropriate to point out the unreasonableness of demanding 'proof' that elephants will have a deleterious impact in a given protected area," they argue. "Firstly 'deleterious' is a value judgement, and rational decisions and some measure of consensus can only be reached in relation to clearly stated and accepted values and associated management objectives."

They add that that experimental proof of negative impacts on biodiversity will only become apparent once they have happened and therefore will be difficult or impossible to reverse.

Citing the precautionary principle (*see box*) and the use of adaptive management which requires "learning by doing" the report argues that elephants need to be culled *in case* their growing numbers damage biodiversity or pose a risk to communities living near the borders of the KNP.

Precautionary principle

Although the report argues for the need to use culling as a precaution against potential loss of biodiversity and threats to people the use of the "precautionary principle" is, as SANParks itself admits, a contentious issue.

"The precautionary principle is subject to confusion, and has to some extent come into disrepute because it is susceptible to interpretation in a number of ways," the report states but goes on to add that if applied in consultation and in recognition of competing interests, can be a useful tool.

Dr Henley, in her paper *Considering More than Elephants*, agrees that the principle is contentious and adds "Further more the precautionary principle has been described as a value judgement suitable for data poor situations whilst opportunities for modeling exercises would be far more effective in adaptive management strategy."

Rio Principle

The report uses the Principle 15 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) definition of the precautionary principle:

"In order to protect the environment the Precautionary Approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation".

SANParks have clearly not provided adequate scientific evidence showing threats of "serious or irreversible damage" and have adapted the precautionary principle to suit their own argument.

The phrase "Lack of full scientific certainty" also implies the requirement for some level of scientific certainty, which, at this stage, is absent.

They believe that should elephants cause major damage to property or life it will cause animosity between local communities and conservation bodies and also require large amounts of money in compensation. SANParks provides no data to support claims of human-wildlife conflict.

They argue that in terms of this scenario the onus is not on them to provide any proof of potential damage but rather on those opposed to culling to prove their argument.

"In these cases there appears to be a good case for assigning the burden of proof to those who are against elephant population management rather than those who support its adoption," they state.

Although SANParks has consulted a large number of scientists on the issue many believe that the interaction between elephants and biodiversity is not fully understood and that more work is needed.

SANParks concede that even their own scientists are "polarised" in their views on the elephant population and its effect on biodiversity.

Premature action

Contrary to the DEAT statement quoted in the Executive Summary that "By all accounts, elephant populations in national parks have now increased to the extent that biodiversity is threatened," there is little consensus and a strong body of opposition to this view.

"We contend that it is premature to instigate management without an adequate knowledge base. Furthermore the management of Kruger's elephants will remain inconclusive due to bias in interpretation of the underlying scientific information," Professor Rudi van Aarde of the University of Pretoria and eight colleagues argue in a paper, *Elephants and their Management in the KNP*. "Scientific support for our understanding of Kruger's elephant problem is limited."

Professor van Aarde and his colleagues pointed out that almost 65 per cent of the 293 scientific references available regarding elephants in the KNP relate directly to reproductive physiology, general physiology, nutrition, morphology, anatomy, history distribution and the ivory trade. Of these spatial dynamics represent 0.7 per cent of all papers; population dynamics (3.8 per cent) and elephant-environment interactions (6.1 per cent) received little attention.

They add that half of 18 studies on the interactions between elephants and the environment focused on one or two plant species. Papers underlying management (translocation, culling etc) accounted for 15 per cent of research.

"SANParks mandate is to maintain biological biodiversity within Kruger therefore the small number of studies in which elephant-biodiversity issues have actually been addressed within Kruger concerns us," Professor van Aarde *et al* write. "These include studies of elephant spatial dynamics, population dynamics and elephant environment interactions."

(This paper was authored by T J Van Aarde, T P Jackson; R A Guldmond; A A Kinahan, Y de Beer; A M Schrader, S M Ferreira, T Ott, E R Lehman)

Further criticism

Other elephant specialists also support the view that SANParks have not done adequate scientific research to support their view that culling should be resumed.

"Culling as a management action intended to conserve biodiversity would be excessive, premature and too simplistic an approach to address the complexity inherent in biodiversity change," Dr Michelle Henley notes in her paper *Considering More Than Elephants*. "It focuses attention on a single species as the sole manipulator of what are essentially multifaceted ecological processes. In doing so it draws attention away from the urgent need to develop an understanding of the broader processes and creates the false impression that appropriate proactive management is being applied."

Further harsh criticism has come from Professor John Skinner formerly head of the Mammal Research Institute at the University of Pretoria.

In a letter to the Sunday Independent he said it was right for the minister to consider the option of culling with caution but said that the SANParks submission lacked scientific backing.

"I gather from colleagues who attended these earlier meetings that there is not a shred of evidence in papers published in the primary scientific literature that elephants adversely affect biodiversity," he wrote. "Perhaps an annual seven per cent rise in the elephant population does pose problems for the Kruger Park. If so we, the public, have a right to know how many projects have been mounted in the past 10 years to investigate the problem and what the results are."

Dr David Mubunda, responding to the letter rejected Professor Skinner's claim that there was insufficient evidence to justify culling but conceded that scientists were polarised on the issue. He also did not offer any particular body of scientific evidence showing that elephants were threatening biodiversity but again stressed the importance of "value systems" in making a decision.

"Ecologists with an intimate knowledge of savannah ecosystems in general, and of the situation in the Kruger National Park in particular, are almost as polarised on the issue as non-scientific stakeholders," Dr Mabunda wrote. "Some, like Professor Skinner, advocate more research before culling. Others urge for culling as a precaution, supported by ongoing research."

"We have been accused of bias. Of course we have an opinion - we do not like the prospect of elephant culling in the Kruger National Park at all, but believe that it is our duty in the best interests of biodiversity conservation and our neighbouring communities," he added.

Fences and neighbouring communities

The SANParks report places heavy emphasis on the needs and views of poor communities living close to the western boundary of the KNP and claims that the growing elephant population constitutes a serious potential risk in these areas.

On several occasions the report highlights elephant breakouts and subsequent damage to property and life as a significant factor in the decision making process of SANParks.

Curiously, given the stated importance of the issue, SANParks keep no records of elephant breakouts, damage to property or life, the number of elephants destroyed in these circumstances or the number of animals herded back into the park after breaking through the fences.

"Fence breaks are currently fairly frequent on the western border of the KNP. As the elephant population increases breaking will increase in response to habitat degradation," the report states. "As made clear by community representatives participating in the Indaba (Great Elephant Indaba, KNP, October 2004) and during the community consultation process the risks posed by elephants are a reality, incidents of damage to property are not uncommon and a few lives have been lost. Both SANParks and provincial conservation authorities frequently need to shoot damage causing elephants in the areas outside the park"



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These, and other, statements clearly indicate that SANParks believe there is a serious human-elephant conflict problem on the borders of the KNP but Ms Wanda Mkutshulwa, head of communications at SANParks, says that her organisation keeps no data on the issue.

Ms Mkutshulwa says that once an animal leaves the KNP it immediately becomes the responsibility of the relevant province, in this case either Limpopo or Mpumalanga.

Although it is understood that the provinces do have some figures relating to breakouts and subsequent damage to property getting access to this data is no easy matter.

Michelle Pickover of the Xwe African Wildlife approached both provinces on 1 August 2005 requesting information about elephant breakouts from the park but despite several further attempts had still received no response by 7 November, three months after her first call.

It is surprising that a matter considered so important by SANParks is not backed up by easily accessible data. If there is no, or limited data on the subject, how can SANParks then make an informed decision on the subject?

While the concerns and physical needs of communities are of major importance and need to be understood by those managing protected areas it is surely incumbent upon authorities to collect data that indicates the scale of what is happening in these areas. Elephants cannot become scapegoats for addressing past political imbalances.





Economic value of elephants

A matter of further concern is the constant emphasis the report places on the economic value of culled elephants.

It points out that culled elephants could enable local communities to establish various small businesses, including butcheries, canning plants and the manufacture of elephant hair curios and bone carving.

It states in several places that culling and the provision of elephant products will help ease tensions with local communities and adds that "extensive consultation with communities adjoining the KNP shows support for culling of elephants and the use of elephant products to provide economic benefits."

This concern is further compounded when read in conjunction with Appendix 5 of the report which discusses a meeting of the African Wildlife Consultative Forum (which is constituted under the Southern African development Community, SADC).

The SANParks report said that the meeting stressed a sense of urgency to utilise culling to deal with the perceived over abundance of elephants in South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe. It said that culling is an essential tool in the 'management toolbox'.

"The tool would effectively compliment the others and enable population management over parts of the elephant range, often in combination with lucrative sustainable use options and benefits to communities and conservation agencies."

Illegal immigrants and fences

While elephants can and do break fences no mention is made of fence maintenance, cable theft or the role illegal immigrants play in breaking fences.

Fences are reported to be in poor condition in several areas of the KNP and this is exacerbated by the regular theft of fencing cable. Illegal immigrants from Mozambique are also reported to cut fences, inadvertently creating easy escape routes for animals.

In August 2002 *Africa Geographic Magazine* reported that Dr Willem Gertenbach, then head of Nature Conservation in the KNP estimated that between 4,000 and 5,000 Mozambicans were illegally crossing the park annually and that they regularly damaged fences on the western boundary.

Disease and fences

SANParks also highlights the risk of disease being spread by elephants and other animals that break out of the park.

Animal disease cost the state and private sector millions of rand annually and is a matter of concern.

The report points out that other species can leave the park in areas where fences have been damaged by elephants but make no comment on fences that have been damaged or stolen by humans. Here again the lack of data relating to elephants and other large animals leaving the park is surprising. It's unclear how SANParks can develop a full understanding of the issue without further research.

Ethics committee

In common with other organisations that work with animals the KNP has an ethics committee which includes veterinarians, scientists and researchers who specialise in work with experimental animals.

"Appropriate decisions on methodology require insight into the technical characteristics of the different methods, whether they involve the use of lethal drug doses, firearms, chemical immobilisation and translocation, or contraception," the report states.

"The role of ethics committees is not to replace stakeholder consultation as a condition for decision making, but rather to provide an independent judgment informed by specialist expertise."

Despite the recognised need for independent viewpoints the ethics committee has no animal welfare or animal rights members.



5. IFAW'S ASSESSMENT AND COMMENT

IFAW has been involved in elephant conservation and protection efforts on the African continent since the early 1990's. IFAW has therefore followed the debate around elephant culling for many years and has played an important part in engaging relevant role-players in framing a pro-active approach to elephant management in South Africa based on sound science and ethical considerations,

To this end IFAW has worked with SANParks to expand existing elephant habitat in Addo and Marakele National Parks; supported important scientific research on the keystone role of elephants in the thicket biome of the Eastern Cape; and supports ongoing research into the meta-population dynamics of elephants in Southern Africa.

IFAW believes culling is a cruel, unethical and scientifically unsound practice that does not consider the welfare implications to elephant society as a whole.

Much of the information included in this document supports our view that SANParks should not be thinking about culling now but rather focusing on gaining a better understanding of the interactions between elephants and their environment.

SANParks has come under criticism time and time again for not providing a firm scientific basis for their recommendations and this report does little to change this view.

Nowhere do SANParks provide adequate scientific evidence of the need to cull and they say that while conservation should be informed by science they believe a final decision on culling is a value judgement that will be made by politicians and bureaucrats.

It is ironic that those now in favour of a reinstatement of culling, the same people who criticised the rationale for the 1995 moratorium by calling for a more scientific approach, are now downplaying the role of science in the debate.

Similarly while SANParks say the issue of human-elephant conflict along the western boundary of the KNP is extremely serious they concede that they do not keep data on the issue.

Can this mean that that the true motivation for the urgent need to manage elephants by culling is a harvesting programme based on economic and political ambitions?

The SADC consultative meeting held in May also stressed the urgency of resuming culling as one of a range of management tools which could be used "in combination with lucrative sustainable use options." This and several other aspects of the meeting further indicate that the gathering was driven by political considerations rather than those of conservation.

It is disturbing to note that the consultative process in South Africa has also produced nothing more than a politically motivated appeal for the resumption of elephant culling in the KNP.

The concept of Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) is actively promoted by SANParks as a means to dealing with community relations.

While it is imperative that communities which have been marginalised for so long derive some kind of benefit from the existence of parks such as the KNP it is important to ensure that such programmes develop in line with the KNP mission of maintaining biodiversity in all its natural and indigenous facets and fluxes, providing human benefits and building a strong constituency, and preserving as far as possible the wilderness qualities and cultural resources of the park.

As far as IFAW is concerned, questions of scientific validity, ethics and animal welfare should be considered far more important than those of economics and politics, especially where the latter are poorly understood.

The SANParks interpretation of the precautionary principle is also to be questioned. They themselves state that it is both open to confusion and criticism, as do many scientists. Their interpretation, coupled with their adoption of the adaptive management concept, is questionable on both scientific and ethical grounds.

What it essentially means is that in the past 10 years SANParks has failed to do their homework and are now trying to make up lost ground by experimenting with elephants by proposing to cull them.

In this instance adaptive management - "learning by doing" - means shooting elephants first and seeing what happens to biodiversity later. There are serious welfare and ethical issues which are ignored in this approach.

The shooting of large numbers of elephants has a significant effect on behaviour amongst cull survivors and there is scientific research to indicate they suffer psychological trauma which can later result in behavioural abnormalities.

Culling will send a disturbing message to the world about South Africa's attitude towards wildlife management but one thing is certain - many people will be horrified and many people will oppose a decision to cull.

Irrespective of SANParks' statement that a tourism boycott never occurred in the pre-1994 era while culling took place South Africa's reputation as a custodian of wildlife will be severely affected if the shooting starts again.

Despite many submissions to conferences and workshops on the matter the SANParks report does not fully reflect the divergence of scientific opinion expressed; instead of carefully explaining how elephants adversely affect biodiversity it shifts the onus onto those opposed to culling to prove that there is no damage being done; and it claims serious human-wildlife conflict along the borders of KNP but produces no specific data instead relying on anecdotal evidence.

SANParks is right, the Minister will make the final decision but we implore those advising him to accept there are alternative viewpoints on the issue and that further research must be done before the triggers are pulled.

6. RECOMMENDED READING

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The International Fund for Animal Welfare works to improve the welfare of wild and domestic animals throughout the world by reducing commercial exploitation of animals, protecting wildlife habitats, and assisting animals in distress.

IFAW seeks to motivate the public to prevent cruelty to animals and to promote animal welfare and conservation policies that advance the well-being of both animals and people.

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