

**AN OVERVIEW OF THE COMMERCIAL  
USE OF ELEPHANTS IN CAPTIVITY IN  
SOUTH AFRICA**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The management of elephants in South Africa has received much attention during the past two years and the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism Marthinus van Schalkwyk recently published a draft set of national norms and standards for the management of all elephants in South Africa.

Although the draft norms and standards make reference to the management of captive elephants the issue, unlike that of wild elephants, has not been publicly debated to any significant degree and has been largely lost in the broader discussion relating to culling and other means of managing wild populations. The draft documents show that there has been little, or no consultation with animal welfare or rights experts about the issue of captive elephants and no effort has been made to draw on the vast body of information available on the subject in Asia.

There are currently at least 112 elephants kept in captivity for commercial use in South Africa at present. These elephants are spread across all South African provinces except for the Northern Cape.

Of the 112 animals in captivity 92 are used for elephant back safaris/rides, walks or other interactions with humans, 14 animals (including four Asian elephants) are used for circuses, filming or other entertainment purposes and six are in zoos.

Elephant back safaris/rides, walks with elephants and general interaction with the animals is heavily promoted as a tourism attraction in South Africa. Similar activities take place in Zimbabwe, Botswana and Zambia.

The present figure of 112 is an increase on the 89 elephants calculated by IFAW to be in captivity in 2005. The increase in numbers is due to the capture of free ranging elephants in private game reserves and elsewhere as well as a number of births in captivity. The current figure also includes two animals considered to be free ranging in IFAW's 2005 report, *Elephants in South Africa* (March 2005) and four Asian elephants which were not included in the report.

This document attempts to draw together all currently available statistics relating to captive elephants in South Africa and highlights a number of important issues relating to the industry, including the controversial capture of young elephants from a free ranging herd.

It also shows that at least three handlers, all Zimbabweans, have been killed by elephants in the last two years and there have been a number of incidents in which people have been injured.

As IFAW pointed out in 2005, there are still no industry-wide norms and standards or laws relating to the training of elephants or the qualifications of trainers and handlers.

This has serious implications for the welfare of the elephants and the safety of the public, trainers and handlers. The absence of enforceable industry-wide norms and standards or laws also has implications for the insurance cover of operators utilising captive elephants in the tourism industry.

## **2. CAPTIVE ELEPHANTS (Numbers and location).**

Captive elephants used for commercial use in South Africa are distributed as follows:

### EASTERN CAPE

Kwantu Private Game Reserve – 5.

Addo Elephant Back Safaris – 3.

The Elephant Sanctuary (The Craggs, near Plettenberg Bay) - 6.

Inkwenkwezi Private Game Reserve (30 km north of East London) – 2.

*Total - 16*

### FREE STATE

Bloemfontein Zoo- 3.

*Total - 3*

### GAUTENG

EFAF (Elephants for Africa Forever) Dinokeng – 2.

Plumari Africa (near Hartebeespoort Dam) – 2.

Johannesburg Zoo – 1.

Pretoria Zoo – 2.

*Total - 7*

### KWAZULU-NATAL

Lion Park and Boswell Circus animals (Near Cato Ridge) - 10 African elephants and 4 Asian.

Mkuze West Game Reserve (Bayete Zulu Game Lodge) - 2 (website indicates that elephant/human interaction is offered at the reserve).

*Total – 16*

### LIMPOPO

Shambala Private Reserve (Waterberg) – 8.

Kapama Game Reserve – (Camp Jabulani) – 14.

EFAF Mooketsi – 12.

*Total - 35*

### MPUMALANGA

Kwa Madwala Private Game Reserve (Near Hectorspruit) – 2.

Hazyview (Two elephants were scheduled to be moved to a new operation near the town of Hazyview from The Elephant Sanctuary, Hartebeespoort, in early May 2007).

*Total – 2 (As of May 2, 2007)*

**NORTH WEST**

Pilanesberg Elephant Back Safaris – 6.

The Elephant Sanctuary (Hartebeespoort) – 6.

Glen Afric Country Lodge (near Hartebeespoort Dam) – 2.

*Total - 14*

**NORTHERN CAPE**

None

**WESTERN CAPE**

Knysna Elephant Park - 10.

Buffelsdrift Game Lodge (Oudtshoorn) – 3 (have permits for three more).

Botlierskop Private Game Reserve (near Mossel Bay) – 2.

Garden Route Game Lodge (near Albertinia) – 1.

Fairy Glen Game Reserve (near Worcester) – 2.

Aquila Safari (near Touws River) – 2.

*Total - 20*

**TOTAL – 112**

NOTE: At least three captive elephants have died in captivity since 1 January, 2005.

- EFAF (Mooketsi) – an elephant was shot after it became uncontrollable in January 2005.
- Kwantu Game Reserve – one elephant captured in Mabilingwe died of pneumonia in May 2006.
- Garden Route Game Lodge – an elephant was killed by a rhino in late 2006.

**Source of animals.**

In South Africa there are a number of sources of captive elephants:

- Free ranging elephants captured during culling operations in Zimbabwe, primarily in the late 1980's and 1990's. (These are animals - young at the time of capture - that were separated from herds which were being culled. They are referred to by the industry as “orphans” or “cull orphans”).
- Free ranging elephants captured during culling operations in the Kruger National Park. Culling was suspended in 1994. These are also animals that were separated from herds which were being culled.
- Free ranging elephants captured in private game reserves in South Africa and free ranging animals captured after escaping from game reserves.
- Free ranging animals captured in the Tuli Block, Botswana in 1998 (The training methods used with some of these animals was later the subject of the “Tuli elephants” animal cruelty court case).
- Births in captivity. (At least five elephants have been born in captivity in South Africa during the past four years. Two have been born at Camp Jabulani

(Kapama), two at the Knysna Elephant Park and one at Pilanesberg Elephant Back Safaris)

A small number of captive elephants come from other unspecified sources. Some elephants have been moved or sold between operators within the industry.

EFAF has trained at least 22 elephants in use in the industry. This includes 12 at Mooketsi and a further 10 animals which are placed at various tourism facilities and are owned jointly in terms of contracts between EFAF and other companies. These include EFAF Dinokeng (2), Plumari Africa (2), Inkwenkwezi (2), Fairy Glen (2) and Kwa Madwala (2).

EFAF has trained all the elephants supplied to these operators. Howard Blight of EFAF said that his company has agreements to ensure that all EFAF trained elephants received proper care throughout their lives.

### **3. NORMS AND STANDARDS RELATING TO CAPTIVE ELEPHANTS.**

Although the draft norms and standards published by Minister van Schalkwyk do deal, albeit briefly, with the management of captive elephants there has been very little, or no, public consultation on the issue. The deadline for submissions and comments on the draft norms and standards was the 4<sup>th</sup> May 2007.

As yet the captive elephant safari industry remains unregulated except for a range of provincial requirements relating to environmental impact assessments, fencing, elephant housing requirements and, in some provinces, general management proposals and business plans. These requirements vary from province to province and offer no detailed industry-wide regulations or guidelines on the methods to be used to train elephants or elephant husbandry best practice. There are also no formal industry-wide regulations or recommendations on what qualifications are required by trainers or handlers or how these qualifications can be obtained or verified.

The draft norms and standards offer little of substance on these matters.

IFAW and number of other organisations including Animal Rights Africa (ARA) and the NSPCA have made submissions to the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) calling for the norms and standards to be reconsidered, especially with reference to captive animals. They argue that the norms and standards as published are extremely vague and make little relevant reference to the methods used in training elephants, their husbandry, education and qualification of trainers and handlers and the monitoring of the industry.

The capture of any wild elephants for use in captivity is also vehemently opposed.

A number of organisations and individuals have also asked that the issue of captive elephants be opened to public debate and proper consultation before being redrafted.

The Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife authorities have also repeatedly expressed their strong opposition to any wild capture of elephants for use in captivity. Last year

all South African provincial wildlife authorities jointly endorsed a submission to central government opposing the wild capture of elephants for use in captivity.

In 2003 the African Elephant Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission stated that “believing there to be no direct benefit for *in situ* conservation of African elephant [the AeSG] does not endorse the removal of elephants from the wild for any captive use.”

Chief Director: Communications at the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism Blessing Manale said a significant number of submissions on the proposed draft norms and standards had been received.

DEAT itself keeps no data on the numbers of captive elephants, their training or any other aspect of the industry as these tasks are delegated to the provinces

Most animal welfare and animal rights organisations say that the existing laws relating to animal cruelty, the Animal Protection Act, No 71 of 1962 (as amended), and the Performing Animals Protection Act No. 24 of 1935 (as amended) were originally drafted with the intention of dealing with domestic and agricultural animals and are sometimes inappropriate when dealing with wild animals and captive elephants.

#### **ELEPHANT TOURISM ASSOCIATION.**

The Elephant Tourism Association (ETA) was formed in October 2006 under the umbrella of the Elephant Managers and Owners Association (EMOA). All the elephant operations listed above are represented by ETA which is co-ordinated by Greg Vogt in Knysna (Vogt is not an elephant owner).

Vogt said that he had been mandated by ETA members to draw up specific operating norms and standards and protocols for the industry in collaboration with its members. All owners of elephant back safari/elephant interaction operations in South Africa are members of ETA. Shearwater Safaris and Safari Par Excellence in Zimbabwe and Zambezi Trails in Zambia are also members.

“A lot of science is learnt from trained elephants and we want that science to be applied specifically to elephants in a trained environment,” Vogt said in an interview in Knysna. “We want a lot more detail than is included in the government’s published draft norms and standards. We are drawing up our own protocols and codes of conducts which will set industry standards.”

“We want to be able to give guidelines as to what criteria needs to be met when someone applies for a permit,” Vogt said. “Our input is very important to whatever decision government makes because we will often be able to see things others will not necessarily pick up.”

He added that ETA also wanted to formalise the human resources aspects of the industry and to maintain a register of recognised handlers and trainers.

“It’s a huge thing and we will write clear definitions of what is needed, what trainers, handlers and minders have to achieve to be a recognised part of the industry,” he said.

He said that ETA wanted to centralise and standardise the industry around a number of key issues. These included elephant husbandry, housing, training, management, education and communicating a conservation message.

Vogt acknowledges that the capture of free ranging calves was a controversial issue but said that “the vast majority of our members, about 80 per cent do not favour the capture of free ranging elephants for use in captivity.”

Vogt said that EFAF, which has in the past captured young elephants in the Selati Game Reserve and animals which have broken out of the Kruger National Park, has stated that “they do not stand for the taking of free ranging elephants from the wild, unless the animals are destined to be culled. They stand by their commitment saying that their previous captures included animals that were going to be culled.”

He estimated that about 1 000 people are employed by the industry. Of these about 55 per cent work directly within the industry and the remainder work in restaurants, as builders, casual labourers or other indirect employment.

#### EFAF

Howard Blight, co-owner of EFAF, and Rory Hensman, EFAF’s elephant trainer have also drawn up an extensive set of 29 protocols dealing with elephant welfare and training, safety and training of handlers, the safety of tourists and a wide range of other subjects. They have also drawn up a 17 point “EFAF Charter” which spells out their position on a number of similar issues.

Details of these documents are published on the EFAF website.

## **4. ISSUES OF RELEVANCE TO THE INDUSTRY**

### **Elephant captures.**

During the last two years there have been a number of captures of free ranging elephants for commercial use in captivity.

There is high demand for young elephants for use in the industry

- June 2006 – Six young elephants aged between 6 -12 years old were captured in the Selati Game Reserve (Limpopo) and taken for training at EFAF in Mooketsi. During the capture other animals from the herd had to be chased off with gunshots while the immobilised animals were prepared for transportation. The owners of Selati said the decision to capture the young animals and send them for training was taken “after careful consideration of the various elephant management options open to us.”
- October 2005 - Six young elephants were split from a herd and captured in the Mabilingwe Game Reserve near Bela Bela (Limpopo) and transported to the Kwantu Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape. Kwantu trained the animals with the intention of starting elephant back safaris. One animal subsequently died of pneumonia.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has opposed Kwantu's application for permits to run safaris on the grounds that they have insufficient experience and that the animals should not have been captured for this purpose. The NSPCA said Kwantu should rather have applied for a licence to be declared a zoo.

At the time of writing the case was still being heard in the Grahamstown Magistrates Court.

- Mid 2004 – EFAF captured four young elephants which had broken out of the Kruger National Park and took them to Mooketsi for training.
- (Zimbabwe) In November 2006 Zimbabwean operator Shearwater Adventures captured 12 young elephants in the Hwange National Park, removing the animals from free ranging herds. Shearwater said that they had captured the animals partly for commercial reasons but also to ease elephant population pressure in the park.

The Zimbabwean National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ZNSPCA) opposed the capture and the conditions under which the animals were held. A number of legal actions have followed and the matter is still in dispute.

Two of the captured elephants have since died and another has escaped.

#### Pilanesberg National Park fires.

In September 2005 devastating fires swept through the Pilanesberg National Park, killing and injuring considerable numbers of animals. At least 50 elephants were injured in the fire.

Some 17 young elephants which had been injured by the flames were captured and removed to game bomas at Hammanskraal.

The animals, aged between 1-12 years old, were badly injured and the majority of animals died or had to be euthanised on the advice of veterinarians and animal welfare experts.

Only two of the captured animals were finally released back into the wild.

A number of commercial captive elephant tourism operators expressed interest in taking over the injured animals.

A further seven animals which had not been captured were also put down in the Park.

#### **Human deaths and injuries attributed to captive elephants.**

At least four handlers have been killed by captive elephants in South African in the last six years. Three of the deaths occurred in the last two years.

Several people, including tourists, have also been injured in incidents involving captive elephants.

#### Deaths (all handlers or other staff):

- 19 December 2006 – A Zimbabwean handler/minder Bizwerk Mojo was killed by an elephant at the EFAF centre at Mooketsi near Tzaneen.
- 6 March 2006 – A Zimbabwean handler Edias Makore was killed by an elephant at Camp Jabulani in the Kapama Game Reserve near Hoedspruit.
- June 2005 – A Zimbabwean handler Tobias Ndhlovu was killed by an elephant at the Knysna Elephant Park.
- April 2001 – A Zimbabwean handler, Fiso Mbambo, was killed by an elephant used in the making of a film at Glen Afric near Haretebeespoort Dam.

The majority of elephant handlers in South Africa are Zimbabweans. Elephant back safaris were started in Zimbabwe prior to the creation of the industry here.

People injured by captive elephants:

- 5 April 2007 – a British couple were seriously injured when they fell of the back of an elephant at The Elephant Sanctuary near Hartebeespoort. The couple were admitted to hospital with serious injuries. The online news service News 24 reported that the couple fell off the elephant as it knelt to let them alight after an elephant back ride.
- 12 November 2006 – A student Will Andrew was injured by injured at the EFAF centre at Mooketsi. He was apparently doing temporary “gap-year” work at EFAF.
- December 2003 – A ranger, Henry Parsons, had his pelvis broken by an elephant at Camp Jabulani in the Kapama Game Reserve.  
A member of a television/film crew was injured in a previous incident at Kapama.

**Insurance:**

As outlined above there are no industry-wide norms and standards governing training methods for elephants in South Africa. There is also no formal industry-wide training or licensing procedure of elephant trainers or handlers.

Brian Courtenay, the chairman and founder of SATIB (Safari and Tourism Insurance Brokers), in Umhlanga Rocks, says the lack of formalised norms and standards or protocols within the industry is of considerable concern and that this needs to be addressed as matter of urgency if the industry is to avoid jeopardising its insurance status and tourism reputation.

He said that many current operating practices are “simply accidents waiting to happen.”

SATIB were founded 17 years ago and are the only specialist risk managers in the tourism and wildlife industry in South Africa. They have eight branch offices in other African countries and have extensive expertise and knowledge on risks associated with “high risk activities”. The company first insured captive elephants more than 15 years ago. SATIB’s risks are covered through Lloyds of London.

Courtney said that many tourism activities, including horse riding, scuba diving, and bungi jumping and interacting with captive elephants are viewed as “high risk activities” by the insurance industry.

“All of those companies offering high risk activities, except for the elephant back industry (including elephant walks and other human elephant interaction), have carefully drawn up protocols and norms and standards,” Courtenay said in an interview. “Elephants, through no fault of their own, are dangerous animals and the industry must, as a matter of urgency, be subject to binding and measurable norms and standards or protocols which should govern the way the industry deals with elephants and their training.”

“My experience is that many in the industry in South Africa seem to be happy to go it on their own and believe they know everything there is to know about elephant training,” he said. “Some operating practices are simply accidents waiting to happen. There have been a number of incidents in the past and they will happen again.”

“The tourism industry is a global activity and international agents are extremely cautious about sending visitors to tourism companies which are not adequately covered.” Courtenay said. “When things go wrong the insurance claims are huge. It doesn’t matter which country you are in.....if things go wrong people can, and do, sue. We see it all the time.”

Courtenay said that proper norms and standards were also necessary to ensure that captive elephants were properly treated.

He added that SATIB’s underwriters, Lloyds, are also “desperately concerned that any activity they underwrite does not have the slightest hint of inhumane or cruel treatment of animals.”

He added that he would like to see captive elephant industry members and all other interested parties meeting to discuss the issues and work together to formulate accepted norms and standards.

### **Provinces**

Most provincial authorities contacted were willing to assist in providing information on the number of captive elephants used by the tourism industry in their provinces.

The exception was Limpopo where Mr Sam Makhubele Senior Manager: Wildlife trade and regulation, refused to provide any information on the grounds that the compilation of this report was insufficient reason for the province to supply information. This is unfortunate in that the information is clearly relevant to the public interest in debating the issue.

It is incongruous that while Minister van Schalkwyk calls for informed public comment on a variety of issues relating to elephants Mr Makhubele saw fit to deny access to information which falls into the public domain.