

National

Activists threaten to interdict Limpopo provincial government

Fury over jumbo 'kidnap'

Fiona Macleod

Animal activists threatened the Limpopo provincial government with court action this week in a bid to rescue six young elephants plucked "heartlessly" from their family groups and sent for training at an elephant-back safari outfit.

The six elephants, aged between six and 12 years, were removed on Family Day over the Easter weekend from their herd in the Selati Game Reserve. Selati is a private reserve near Phalaborwa in Limpopo, owned by wealthy shareholders. A well-known farming and property development company in Mpumalanga, HL Hall & Sons, is the reserve's main shareholder.

Activists said the youngsters were taken from their families in "a heartless and relentless 10-and-a-half-hour capture ordeal". A young bull elephant that repeatedly tried to reach the captured youngsters had to be deterred with gunshots.

"Elephant experts worldwide are of the opinion that the close family bonds these animals have are subjected to immense trauma in this kind of situation," said activist groups Xwe African Wild Life and Justice for Animals in a statement.

"Most humans would consider it cruel to remove a seven-year-old child from its mother and family. Since it has been proved that elephants parallel humans in terms of emotions, and in many other respects, it is cruel to remove a seven-year-old calf from its elephant family."

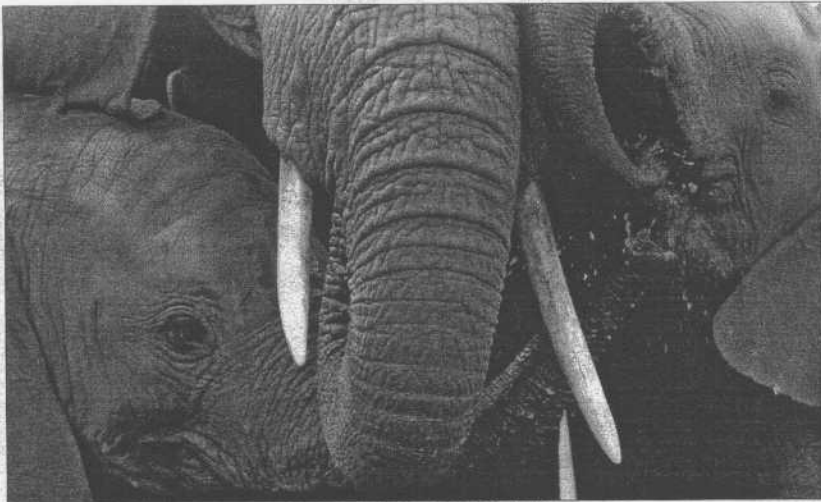
Xwe, an NGO "with the primary aim of protecting the interests of animals", sent a lawyer's letter to the Limpopo environmental affairs department on Wednesday, demanding the withdrawal of the capture permit and a directive that the six elephants be returned to Selati. If this was not done by 4.30pm on Friday April 28, Xwe would apply for an urgent High Court interdict.

The group said the permit did not comply with the department's own policy that only viable family groups of elephants should be relocated, and violated the Animals Protection Act and other environmental legislation.

The young elephants were taken to a training facility near Tzaneen run by Elephants for Africa Forever (Efaf), a partnership between Zimbabwean tourism and hunting operators and Limpopo tomato farmers ZZ2.

Efaf is headed by businessman Howard Blight, who owns Barnyard Theatres in Gauteng. Blight's elephant trainer is Rory Hensman, a former Zimbabwean who has trained most of the 60-odd elephants available for riding in South Africa.

Conservation organisations such as the Elephant Managers and Owners Association, which oversees private ownership of elephants, oppose the capture and training of wild animals for elephant-back safaris. Not least



Giant memory: Experts say that elephant family bonds mimic those of humans. Photo: AP

among the problems is an increase in accidents – two elephant handlers have been killed in South Africa in the past eight months.

A comprehensive investigation of elephants in captivity in this country, published by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (Ifaw) last March concluded there were no guidelines or laws applicable to the training of elephants and the industry was "open to abuse, particularly as all elephants in this sector are used in commercial operations run for profit".

Ifaw said this week two more young elephants from the herd at Selati were darted and immobilised, but were rejected as "unsuitable candidates for the safari industry" and released. Cattle prods were apparently used to force the youngsters from the transport trucks into stables at the training facility, "where they are confined in separate stables in a converted tobacco shed without any access to natural light".

Said Ifaw director Jason Bell-Leask this week: "The elephant-back safari tourism industry typically claims it is 'saving' young elephants from sure death in 'culls'. In fact, they are taking young elephants from the wild to be subjected to confinement and training that is wrong, cruel and exploitative."

Rob Snaddon, managing director of HL Hall & Sons and chairperson of the Selati Game Reserve Association, said the decision to capture the youngsters and send them for training was taken "after careful consideration of the various elephant management options open to us."

"We have a closed reserve – a fenced area where a wide variety of game flourishes, including elephants. If the elephant population grows too big for that space, it impacts on all the other animals at Selati, as well as the existing elephant population."

Efaf's Blight told the *Mail & Guardian* "every fact" disseminated by the activist groups was "nonsense" and "second-hand information. We conduct our business with great sensitivity and respect for the elephants".

Elephant-back safari operators say they 'save' elephants from culling

Asked what price he paid for the elephants, he said it was "the meat price, because they would have been culled. That is about R10 a kilo."

The Ifaw investigation last year concluded that the company was not capturing elephants just for use in its own elephant-back safari business.

It said Efaf was training them to sell them on – earning in the region of R900 000 per elephant – or charging a monthly "lease" of between R20 000 and R25 000 per animal.

A controversial aspect of this week's capture was the presence of staff members of the National Council of SPCAs (NSPCA), one of the most vocal organisations in exposing the plight of the Tuli elephants. These were youngsters captured in the Botswana bush in 1998 and brutally beaten by mahouts (elephant keepers) at a training facility owned by wildlife dealer Riccardo Ghiazza.

Blight and Snaddon were quick to point out the capture had gained approval from the NSPCA members and Limpopo provincial conservation authorities, but their participation infuriated the other animal welfare groups.

NSPCA director Marcelle Meredith responded that far from rubber-stamping the exercise, the role of her staff on site "was to monitor the process to ensure the welfare of the animals was not compromised".

The NSPCA believed the capture of wild elephants for "taming" and lifelong captivity was unethical and cruel. But if legal requirements were met and the authorities sanctioned the capture, the organisation was statutorily obliged to ensure the humane treatment of the animals. "Being present does not mean we condone," she said.

A spokesperson for Shibu Rampedi, head of Limpopo nature conservation, said she had received Xwe's letter of demand and passed it on to her legal advisers on Wednesday.

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