

SATURDAY Star

A difficult decision

The minister of environmental affairs and tourism, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, is soon to get a long-awaited report on how the elephant population of the Kruger National Park should be managed.

The animals need this managing because their numbers in the park have swelled from 9 000 in 1994 – when a moratorium was in place on culling – to more than 13 000 at present.

In the past, back in the 1960s and 1970s, conservation authorities in South Africa and what is now Zimbabwe didn't hesitate to load rifles and kill thousands of elephants.

Their argument then, and the argument now of those in favour of using culling as a management tool, is that without some form of population control the voracious vegetarian jumbos will simply eat themselves out of house and home. More than that, the argument goes, they will destroy valuable habitat for

other animals and imperil ecologically critical bio-diversity.

Those who oppose culling point out that elephants are sentient beings, apparently capable of higher thought and experiencing emotion. The more researchers explore the world of elephants, the more they become convinced that these animals are out of the ordinary.

As we report today, the opening up of South African and neighbouring countries' wildlife areas into trans-frontier "peace parks" could offer some hope for elephants.

Once the fences come down, the artificial, human-made barriers to migration will be no more and the elephant populations can spread out.

There are other solutions and management tools which should also be considered ahead of culling. Now is the time for rational, but humane, decision-making. We humans have an obligation to care for those who share the world with us.