

D-Day looms for jumbos in Kruger

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D-Day is fast approaching for thousands of elephants in the Kruger National Park.

A long-awaited report by South African National Parks (SANP) that proposes ways to manage the rapidly growing elephant population of Kruger Park will be presented to Marthinus van Schalkwyk, the environmental affairs and tourism minister, on September 20.

The report will address the controversial option of culling. It will also look at other methods of managing populations, including contraception and allowing the animals to re-enter traditional range areas.

It is expected the report and the minister's subsequent decisions will be used as a guide for dealing with growing elephant populations in smaller state and provincial game reserves as well as those on private land.

The recommendations will also be closely scrutinised by officials in Botswana and Zimbabwe, who have suggested that culling might be the only way to control the growth of their elephant populations.

The director of communications at the department of environmental affairs and tourism, JP Louw, said Van Schalkwyk would need some time to study the report before deciding how the issue should be handled.

"At this stage I cannot give any idea of how long it will be before the minister acts on the recommendations," Louw said.

Culling, believed by some managers to be the only effective, quick method of reducing elephant populations, is widely opposed in South Africa and internationally.

Earlier suggestions by SANP officials that culling should be considered were met with vociferous opposition and some organisations even threatened a tourism boycott of South Africa.

The elephant population in the Kruger National Park and bordering private game reserves stands at about 14 000 and is growing at a rate of about seven percent a year, but experts disagree on the degree to which this affects biodiversity.

Some believe that the increase in numbers - the population was maintained at just over 7 000 until culling was stopped in 1995 - has resulted in widespread habitat destruction that they argue has a negative effect on other species.

Others say the ecological effects of the sometimes destructive feeding habits of elephants are not fully understood, and have called for more studies.

"We are looking at a whole range of factors but we are not married to the concept of managing fixed numbers of elephants," the director of conservation at SANP, Dr Hector Magome, said this week. "No figures have been put to the plans."

There are a further 3 000 elephants in South Africa spread across about 80 state, provincial and private reserves.

Elephant numbers are growing in all these reserves and many managers await government guidance on the Kruger issue before taking decisions on how to manage their own populations.

The Elephant Managers' and Owners' Association (Etoa), which represents 75 percent of registered state and private elephant owners and managers, believes that nearly every small nature reserve in South Africa with an elephant population has reached the upper limit of capacity, and immediate action is necessary if biodiversity is to be protected.

Elephant management policies and methods have been discussed at several conferences arranged by SANP, Etoa and other organisations over the past year, but some scientists and animal welfare groups believe that insufficient attention has been given to those who oppose culling.