

Minister to discuss elephant culling with scientists

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Local and international scientists have been invited to another round table with Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism Marthinus van Schalkwyk to discuss the proposed culling of elephants in the Kruger National Park.

"The minister recently [on Monday November 28] heard presentations from a large number of stakeholders [NGOs, activists and other interest groups]. He was struck by the lack of consensus regarding key questions related to elephant management.

"It was disturbing that scientists appear intolerant of each other's views," JP Louw, head of communications at the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, told the Mail & Guardian Online on Thursday.

A report from the South African National Parks (SANParks) board in July this year proposed the culling of elephants in the Kruger National Park. The report stated that the elephants are damaging the park's biodiversity.

Van Schalkwyk has now agreed to set aside another day for a meeting with scientists in early 2006. Stakeholders will have the opportunity to bring in ideas for debating. They will also be asked to identify elephant specialists who are prepared to present their conclusions.

Louw said four key questions still need to be addressed and answered:

Are there too many elephants?

Are they causing damage to biodiversity?

Is action needed to reduce populations? and

Which management options are most appropriate?

Scientists from SANParks, which has already recommended to the minister that elephant populations be reduced, will participate in the round table.

"Many commentators have claimed that SANParks has little or no evidence to support its [pro-culling] recommendations. The relevant scientists have welcomed an opportunity to respond," said Louw.

Michele Pickover, from Xwe African Wildlife, one of the 100 South African groups represented by animal rights group Elephants Alive, earlier said the plan to cull elephants in the park is "deeply flawed, ecologically and ethically".

On Thursday, Pickover told the M&G Online again that there is no necessity to cull.

"It is scientists against each other, they must look at the data," she said. "I think the data does speak for itself and it speaks against culling. [The minister] should have an international tribunal with scientists, who are well-known for their quality work who no one will object to.

"They should evaluate the data and then recommend to the minister. The Kruger scientists have their own laws and we must put them in a round the table against independent scientists."

Pickover also feels the minister is forgetting about the moral imperatives in this discussion.

"My concern is that it is not all about science. There is also a moral imperative that they have to take into account. They are now completely ignoring the moral imperative. They should have a round table about the moral dimensions as well."

Seven major conservation and wildlife NGOs in South Africa said on December 2 that culling elephants in the Kruger National Park must be considered.

"As wildlife conservationists, we can't focus on an individual [elephant]. We look at the bigger picture of conservation and biodiversity," the conservation director at WWF South Africa, Rob Little, said.

Other groups that distance themselves from Elephants Alive, which is opposed to culling but agrees with SANParks, are the Botanical Society of South Africa, the Elephant Managers and Owners' Association, the Endangered Wildlife Trust, the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa and the Wilderness Foundation.

Louw said a policy framework will be published for public comment after the round table.

Meanwhile, Justice for Animals, South Africans for the Abolition of Vivisection, and Xwe African Wildlife have merged to form Animal Rights Africa.

Pickover said: "We are now in formal discussion about starting this full-time animal rights group early next year. There is enough public attention and rather than having all the small groups getting together, we will be an opposition group against the mainstream conservation groups like WWF South Africa."