

Give us the facts on elephant culling

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The *Mail & Guardian* had barely hit the streets last Friday when the CEO of South African National Parks (SANParks), David Mabunda, fired off an SMS accusing the newspaper of attacking him on a personal level.

In response to an article on elephant culling ("Roll up for the culling circus"), he said, I was using a public platform to "bash and trash" him. He even accused me of having a "venomous hatred of him."

What is going on here? Does the *M&G* have a personal vendetta against Mabunda? Do we, as his spokesperson Wanda Mkutshulwa claims, pray hard for juicy quotes from critics just so that we can show him in a bad light?

On the contrary, the *M&G* has the utmost respect for David Mabunda. We put a lot of time and effort last year into winning a tender to produce a magazine for SANParks. Unfortunately, we did not manage to conclude a contract that suited both parties, but that has not changed our spirit of cooperation with the national conservation body.

In fact, we have been accused by a number of anti-culling NGOs of being biased in favour of SANParks. At about the time Mabunda was firing off his missives last week, I also received an angry call from Barbara Maas, director of Care for the Wild in London, who accused me of prejudicing her anti-culling campaign.

So, everybody is angry and I guess, as the saying goes, this means we are doing our job as a newspaper. But this job includes raising issues under debate - and culling elephants is a controversial issue that affects many South Africans.

The nub of our questioning revolves around the process being deployed to get the public, both local and foreign, to agree to culling. SANParks is unequivocal that culling needs to happen in some national reserves, including the Kruger National Park, to preserve biodiversity and protect other species.

But it refuses to give us the specifics. How many elephants does the organisation plan to cull? It makes a difference whether they are planning to kill 10 or 1000 in a year. To say SANParks is "looking at 7% of the population in those areas where maximum reduction management is needed" is obfusatory because we don't know, and aren't being told, the total number of elephants.

How are they planning to do it? Is

Scoline, the drug that paralyses the elephants until shooters on foot can finish them off, still being considered? This is a practical welfare issue that needs to be discussed.

What do they plan to do with the elephant products? It is clear that neighbouring communities stand to benefit, but how? Suggestions range from giving them meat to providing them with ivory to work and sell.

Mabunda was proud of closing down the abattoir in Skukuza, which processed elephant carcasses, when he was director of the Kruger in 1995, long before he became CEO of SANParks. What has made him change his mind?

Is he under pressure to keep Kruger's neighbours happy? When the *M&G* reported in February this year that there were land claims on large sections of the Kruger, SANParks accused us of "inaccurate" and "insensitive" reporting. In September, a parliamentary select committee on land and environmental affairs confirmed our story after visiting the Kruger.

Is it about money? The latest SANParks annual report shows that revenue from private tourism concessions has dropped by nearly half and that unit occupancy has dropped from 75% to 65%. Are the issues related?

SANParks won't answer these questions. Mkutshulwa says they are premature and will only be decided once the principle of culling has been approved. But how can people approve a plan if they don't know what it means? There may be unresolved debate about the abstract principle of culling, but it should not be debated in the abstract, anyway. We should understand what it means in concrete terms, and decide on that basis.

Minister of Environment and Tourism Marthinus van Schalk **k** will make the final decision on culling. Brian Gibson, his "issue management" adviser, says the process of public consultation is specially designed to avoid specific details. According to Gibson, scraps between SANParks and NGOs like the one covered in our story last week are a sideshow. The main debate, he says, is "where the minister is going with this". But the minister is just listening; he's not saying anything at the moment.

Gibson says Van Schalkwyk will decide on whether culling is acceptable in principle, and then the principle will be applied in different ways in different areas. "It's a logical, consequential process," he says.

Perhaps. But let's hope somebody asks the right questions - and lets us know the answers - before

it is too late.

