

## **Experts question science of elephant culls**

By Ed Stoddard

Source: Reuters (20 Jul 2005 11:58:17 GMT)

JOHANNESBURG, July 20 (Reuters) - Experts questioned the wisdom of using culls to contain swelling populations of African elephants on Wednesday, saying the science was dubious.

South African authorities are keen to resume culling -- a practice they halted over a decade ago in the face of public outrage -- to cut growing elephant numbers in the country's flagship Kruger National Park.

No decision has been made but government scientists say the animals, whose numbers are estimated to have almost doubled in a decade to close to 12,000, are now eating themselves and other animals out of house and home in the 2-million hectare park.

Culling is also being mooted as an option in other parks, which in South Africa are enclosed by fences, meaning the big animals only have limited space to breed and feed in.

But experts at a workshop in Johannesburg on Wednesday said the science behind such reasoning was questionable and could even have an adverse impact on other species.

"It's not just elephants that affect vegetation and the abundance of plant species. Other herbivores such as giraffes and kudus eat the same things as elephants and will fill that niche if elephants are removed," said Bruce Page, a lecturer in ecology at South Africa's University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Page also told Reuters that many African parks had been devoid of large animals before they were proclaimed because of overhunting and so the landscape was often in an "unnatural state" with too many trees.

Kruger officials contend that elephants are devastating woodlands -- but many of these forested areas sprung up before the park was proclaimed over a century ago and it may now be reverting over the long term to its previous state.

CHANGE IS GOOD

Until the practice was halted, Kruger officials employed regular culls to keep the elephant population at close to 7,000, a number that Oxford-based ecologist Keith Lindsay described as not based on science.

"The problem is that they have tried to manage the park in a kind of state of equilibrium. But ecosystems are all about change, not staying the same," he said. He also questioned the conventional view that limiting populations of elephant -- the world's largest land mammal -- would give other creatures more space, promoting biodiversity.

"Some species of antelope prefer open grassland patches on the edges of woodlands," he said. "If you control elephants to the point where they don't keep grassland patches open you could lose species which prefer such areas," he said.

Much opposition to culling is based on grounds of cruelty. The operation typically involves the rounding up by helicopter of entire family groups which are shot from the air, a process that even its staunchest advocates admit is nasty.

Intelligent, highly-social animals with long lifespans, the culling of elephants strikes a chord with the public in the way that it would not with other species.

Alternatives to culling including relocation and expanding park spaces. But on an impoverished continent with growing numbers of rural people such options cannot go on indefinitely.

The World Conservation Union said last month that elephant populations in east and southern Africa were on the rise.

It said surveys showed an increase over a 5-year period to 2002 in elephant numbers in the two regions to 355,000 from 283,000 -- a growth rate of about 4.5 percent per year.