

Culling the tourism trade

When six bull elephants escaped from the Kruger National Park two weeks ago and were shot on community lands, there was an outcry from the public.

So what will the public make of plans by South African National Parks (SANParks) to shoot up to 6 000 elephants in the world-renowned park? As Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism Marthinus van Schalkwyk said at a briefing to announce these plans this week, there is a "special aura" around elephants, and killing them evokes powerful emotions.

The department has contracted an "issue management" consultant to deal with the expected backlash and to facilitate public debate. SANParks, having delivered its proposed elephant management strategy to the minister, has been instructed to step out of the arena for a while.

One of the first "issues" the consultant needs to tackle is to get Van Schalkwyk to listen to alternative viewpoints. SANParks officials have either reluctantly attended or refused to attend gatherings where not only the ethics of, but also the scientific necessity for culling, have been discussed.

The criticisms may sometimes come from voices the powers-that-be would rather not hear. But they are loud and influential voices and they reach the ears of international tourists. Like his predecessors Pallo Jordan and Valli Moosa, Van Schalkwyk is under pressure to expand tourist numbers. Unlike them, he seems incapable of saying say that the culling of elephants will not happen while he is minister.

The "issue management" consultant, Brian Gibson, advised the department during the World Summit on Sustainable Development and later advised the asbestos industry. His counsel to the latter was that it was in their best interests to get out of the asbestos business.

Gibson told the *Mail & Guardian* this week the department and Cabinet were not convinced culling was the only solution to growing elephant populations, and non-lethal alternatives would be examined. Given the expected public outcry at the possible shooting of thousands of elephants, he may be wise to advise Van Schalkwyk that the tourism and killing businesses do not mix.