

## **To cull or not to cull?**

By Myrtle Ryan

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It was a gathering of the big bull elephants. No tusks were locked in battle as they were all on the same side.

Experts gathered at Wits university in Johannesburg this week to discuss the ever emotive issue of culling.

However, this workshop - facilitated by Xwe African Wildlife and Justice for Animals - was aimed at alternative elephant management.

### **'Culling was considered in 1960, but look what happened - natural attrition'**

Those attending the "Elephants Alive" workshop came from a broad spectrum:

- Bruce Page, a lecturer in ecology based at the School of Biological and Conservation Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal
- Will Travers, the president of the Species Survival Network and chief executive officer of the Born Free Foundation
- Dr Keith Lindsay, an Oxford-based ecologist representing Care for the Wild International
- Professor Rudi van Aarde, professor of zoology at the University of Pretoria and director of the Conservation Ecology Research Unit
- Dr Samuel Kasiki and Patrick Omondi, both specialists with the Kenya Wildlife Service
- Dr Simon Adams, formerly of the Zoological Society of London, to name a few.

While Kruger Park officials claim the elephants are devastating vast tracts of vegetation in the park to the detriment of other animals, these alternative experts believe the blame should not be laid just at the door of the tuskers.

"Other herbivores such as giraffe and kudu eat the same things as elephants and will fill that niche if elephants are removed," Page said.

Culling, they say, could have serious consequences. Kasiki pointed out that in Tsavo National Parks (in south-east Kenya and north-east Tanzania) in the early 1960s the elephant population had numbered between 39 000 and 42 000.

In 1970 and 1971, this crashed due to drought. A massive increase in poaching saw it decline further from an estimated 25 000 in 1972 to about 5 000 in 1988, when the Kenyan government intervened to save the few remaining elephants.

"Culling was considered in 1960, but look what happened - natural attrition," said Kasiki.

"Nature's most powerful tool, natural selection, cannot be duplicated by man."

Omondi that said between 1973 and 1989 the overall elephant population in Kenya had declined from about 167 000 to 16 000. Strict law enforcement

and the drop in the global ivory trade caused a decline in poaching. The population now stood at about 30 000.

Speaking about possible alternatives to culling, Henk Bertschinger, professor of theriogenology at the University of Pretoria, said that Makalali and Mabula reserves (in Limpopo Province) had had a 100 percent success rate with contraception, using the pZP vaccine.

There had been no change in the behaviour of the females as a consequence. "They showed no change in social hierarchy or nursing behaviour, nor did they display aggression," said Bertschinger.

Stephen Henley, research ecologist with Save the Elephants Transboundary Elephant Research Programme, said "green" hunting in the Timbavati, alongside the Kruger Park, had proved a practical alternative to lethal hunting.

The hunter darts the elephant, which is then fitted with a bio-telemetry collar, and becomes part of a research programme. "Trophy bulls are not removed from the population, income is generated, and the hunter gets a chance to redefine his role in conservation," said Henley.

Jason Bell-Leask, southern African director for the International Fund for Animal Welfare (Ifaw), said, "Ifaw has always held the view that culling is not an acceptable way to manage elephants. We have consistently said that other, more humane methods of management, need to be found."

Finally, Kasiki pointed to the fact that the elephant is a "flagship species". "By attracting attention to their future conservation, elephants also focus attention on the plight of the ecosystem of which they form an integral part."

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