

# Culling won't win SA any friends

To say the issue of culling elephants in the Kruger National Park is emotive is a desperate understatement. The issue is so fraught that the government has sidestepped it for the past 10 years, putting a moratorium on culls that has seen the elephant population soar.

The truth of the matter is that the image of the apartheid government was so odious that culls could be carried out to maintain the elephant population at the level of about 7 000 because the Nationalist government had no reputation to besmirch. But the advent of democracy and the re-entry of South Africa to decent society meant culling had to stop. The wholesale slaughter of entire elephant herds was not an image the new South Africa wanted to present to the world.

But such has been the growth of the number of elephants in the Kruger - now about 14 500 in the park and adjacent private reserves - that South African National Parks has drawn up a report recommending to the government what should be done to reduce their numbers to manageable levels.

Press reports abroad this week that the parks board wanted to cull up to 10 000 of the beasts were way off the mark. In fact the custodians of our parks say they do not want to kill any elephants at all, but argue that they may be forced to if they believe Kruger's biodiversity has to be protected.

Presented with the parks board report this week, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, the environment and tourism minister, said guidelines for the management of elephants would be published for public comment. Well, save for the meat-starved communities adjoining the Kruger, we can tell him what the public response will be: don't cull at any cost. There will be vociferous reaction from international conservation bodies, who have previously warned they could mobilise their considerable memberships to boycott South Africa. This is a real threat, considering that tourism is South Africa's main earner of foreign exchange.

Also in those submissions will be calls to push ahead faster with opening up more territory for elephants through the new transfrontier park with Mozambique, although the planned expansion into Zimbabwe will be moribund until the old tusker in State House in Harare leaves the stage. There will also be impassioned suggestions to resort to contraception and translocations, both expensive and time-consuming.

So, is culling inevitable and unavoidable? We think not. The wisely proclaimed period for public consultation must be used to further explore alternatives and determine whether, indeed, the population of the Kruger and its surrounds has reached crisis levels. From a casual visitor's point of view, the most easily accessible part of the the park, the south, is indeed overpopulated - by tourists, local and foreign, not elephants.

Culling, as the parks board so clearly realises, must be the choice of last resort. We have not reached that point yet.