

Plan to cull Kruger elephants is 'deeply flawed'

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NGOs, activists and other interest groups opposing elephant culling in the Kruger National Park argued that culling is not the solution when they met Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism Marthinus van Schalkwyk on Monday.

Michele Pickover, from Xwe African Wildlife, one of the 100 South African groups represented by Elephants Alive, said the plan to cull elephants in the park is "deeply flawed, ecologically and ethically".

A report from the South African National Parks board (SANParks) in July this year proposed culling between 5 000 and 7 000 elephants. The report states that the elephants are damaging the biodiversity of the Kruger National Park.

The Elephants Alive group was formed after the release of the report.

"We were quite disturbed by the report; a lot has been left out. They should have consulted us and our views," said Pickover.

Pickover told the *Mail & Guardian Online* that SANParks has an economic interest in the culling.

They [SANParks] have an economic interest. That is, the selling of ivory. South Africa is one of the biggest movers of ivory in Africa. They give a spin on it by saying that they give it to the communities; because they 'benefit from it'. What communities are they talking about and isn't this a minuscule thing? Rather do contraception. It is more durable, but it obviously doesn't suit their interest.

"There is no problem with elephants. SANParks had a spin on this. The media covered what they said and now, if you ask someone in the streets, they will say that there are too many elephants. It's in the national psyche, but not true. And they twist it by saying it is better from an ecological perspective, but this is also not true. Other elephants will take the place of the killed ones. Culling is not the solution; it actually adds to the problem."

Van Schalkwyk will make the final decision on culling. JP Louw, head of communications at the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, told the *M&G Online* that the discussion is not only about culling.

"It is not correct to say that this is only about the culling; it is about elephant management. It will probably be next year only when we start writing drafts and standards [about elephant management]. There will also be a public impact, so we need to do some public consultation. Then each individual park has to draw an elephant-management plan and they have to consult locally. Until that is approved, we are not able to do anything. So there can be contraceptives, transportation and culling in the end."

A total of 14 562 elephants were killed during culls in South Africa between 1967 and 1994, according to SANParks chief executive David Mabunda. Now a moratorium keeps SANParks from culling.

The Elephants Alive group wants to keep this in place; SANParks wants the moratorium to be lifted.

Between 1967 and 1994, 2 175 elephants were translocated to other parks.

"They moved the elephants to smaller parks, but that is not that great; there is a limit on the amount of elephants a park can have. And you can't just put a couple of elephants in a truck and move them. They will come back to their old habitat; they do that naturally, on their own," said Pickover.

"It stands to reason that visitors from the United Kingdom and elsewhere, who would otherwise travel to South Africa to see its magnificent wildlife, will vote with their feet.

"Most of the overseas tourists come to Kruger park. It is a different tourist from the one that came 10 years ago. They are now more aware of ethical issues. This is a real threat to the tourism industry and we pointed this out to the minister," said Pickover.

The Kruger National Park is at present thought to have a population of 12 467 elephants. Had the culling until 1994 not taken place, there would be 80 000, Mabunda told the South African Press Association recently.

"Right now, the parks which were given elephants have more or less the same overpopulation problem being experienced by the Kruger park," he said.

"If there is no culling done from now, by 2020 there will be 34 000 elephants in the Kruger Park if growth continues at an annual increase of 7%."

Pickover said: "Today, we had an hour to put this [that culling is not the solution] across to the minister; we told him that there are more tools than culling. We now wait for the minister's decision on what to do. We do have good faith in him; I believe he will do the right thing."