

Beware South Africans, Your Wildlife is Being Hung Out to Dry by Ron Thompson

I attended the Great Elephant Indaba that was held at Kruger National Park's Berg-en-Dal camp last year. The debate was whether or not to cull the game reserve's excessive elephant population. I went there representing the South African Hunters Association - of which I am not a member. I could equally well have gone on my own cognizance because I have spent five decades working in and around Africa's national park systems and I have vast experience in the management of elephants.



Two of my past posts were those of Provincial Game Warden-in-charge of Hwange National Park in what is now Zimbabwe - one of Africa's premier game reserves; and Director of the Bophuthatswan a National

Park's Board in what is now the North West province of South Africa. During my active service I was a member of the British Institute of Biology and a Chartered Biologist for the European Union.

What I saw in the vicinity of Berg-en-Dal was a devastated habitat that bore no resemblance to exactly the same but healthy woodland complexes that existed just across the park boundaries. The severely degraded state of the habitat at Berg-en-Dal was the result of too much elephant utilisation over too many years. And I know that similar states of affairs occur in other parts of Kruger.

A documented study at Satara, for example, showed that between 1960 and 1981 the top canopy tree population was reduced by 90 percent - due solely to elephant action - and since then (24 years ago) the elephant numbers in Kruger have doubled. I believe something of a similar nature has happened in

most of the Kruger habitats.

Hector Magome, Director of SANParks conservation services, recently claimed that Kruger was carrying 12 000 elephants. He said this was 5 000 too many. This suggests that 7 000 elephants is the sustainable carrying capacity for Kruger. As I understand the current controversy, Mr. Magome implied that culling would have to be resumed to rectify this state of affairs - a statement which has got the animal rightists up in arms.

First of all let me say that 7000 elephants - at which the previous culling operations were designed to hold the elephant numbers - is NOT sustainable in Kruger. When the decision was made to hold the elephant population at that number, it was a temporary target that was to be revised when the then developing water supply programme had been concluded. It was NOT determined on the sustainable carry capacity of the Kruger habitats. When one understands that the degradation of the Satara top canopy tree population continued to decline between 1967 (when culling was first introduced to KNP) and 1981 (when the last Satara top canopy tree census was made) it SHOULD ring our alarum bells. It MUST tell every responsible, thinking and intelligent person who tries to understand the elephant culling controversy that 7000 elephants is NOT a sustainable number for KNP!

Furthermore, because the KNP habitats have been so drastically and continuously damaged since the 1960s, the present very degraded state of the KNP habitats cannot sustainably carry anywhere near the same number of a whole range of wild animal species, that they COULD have carried when the habitats were healthy. What the South African public should be demanding of SANParks, now, therefore, is the reduction of elephant numbers to a level that is considerably BELOW the CURRENT habitat carrying capacity - and that they should be held at this lower level until the habitats recover (no matter how long that takes). Only when the habitats have recovered should the elephant numbers be allowed to increase to, and be maintained at, their THEN optimal and sustainable carrying capacity. In my opinion, this is the only responsible elephant management strategy that SANParks SHOULD be considering at this time.

There ARE other ostensibly 'responsible' management options - IF one accepts the management philosophies that support them - but they ALL require the culling of elephants. There is no getting away from the culling option, therefore, no matter what management strategy is adopted.

SANparks knows all this. They would also dearly love to implement SOME kind of responsible elephant management programme because they KNOW that, if they do not, the growing and already excessive elephant population will hugely impair the game reserve's currently great bio-diversity. And maintaining the park's bio-diversity is the administration's PRIMARY responsibility.

There is an irrevocable hierarchy of priorities with regards to the management of natural resources on ANY piece of wildlife real estate:

(1) Our FIRST priority must be for the protection and "wise-use" of the soil, for without soil there can be no plants, and without plants there can be no animals.

(2) Our SECOND priority must be for the protection and "wise use" of plants. Plants do a number of things:

- (a) They provide food for herbivorous animals (which in turn provide food for the predators);
- (b) They provide shelter for animals - from the elements and from their enemies;
- (c) Together with the circumstances of their physical environment, the physical characteristics of plants create all the different habitats that occur on planet earth - and this determines the number of different animal species that can exist; and finally
- (d) Plants provide "cover" for the soil, protecting it from erosive elements - the sun, the wind, and (especially) the rain.

(3) Our THIRD (AND LAST) priority must be for the protection and "wise use" of the animals.

It stands to reason that when the population of ANY herbivorous species of wild animal exceeds the carrying capacity of its habitat, it will consume more plant material every year than the plants can replace during the growing (wet) season of the next year. Every year, therefore, the plant communities will be continuously degraded. This will result in less and less food being available every year for all the other species populations - many of which will go into decline. The shelter that plants provide animals will also be reduced - exposing many of the more sensitive animal species to greater predation. Habitats will change in character and this will adversely affect those sensitive species (of both plants AND animals) that are the most specifically adapted to the original healthy habitats. Many such species (of plants AND animals) will eventually become locally extinct. Finally, with a reduction in plant cover the soil will be more greatly exposed to erosion - by sun, wind and rain - which means the very foundation elements of the whole ecosystem will be destroyed. And elephants are the most problematical of all the herbivorous animals in this regard, because they are capable of bringing about the greatest of changes to the environment.

South African nature lovers should start to think, in terms of this scenario, about the reasons why the sable and roan antelopes are disappearing in KNP - and why the introduced



Lichtenstein's hartebeest has not yet taken hold (which are just three examples). And why our scientists are taking such care to investigate the status of the park's ground hornbills. When the above wildlife management principles are understood it will not take very long for even lay-nature-lovers to put two and two together. One does not have to be a rocket scientist to start reaching the obvious conclusions.

If we were to try to place TOURISM on this list it would come fourth in our priorities. This means that only WHEN both the soil and the plants are being properly managed, and only WHEN the animals are in proper balance with the soil and the plants, should TOURISM be considered a priority at all. This does not imply that tourism in a modern national park is not important. Tourism IS important. What DOES imply is that the proper management of the soil, and of the plants and of the animals, is infinitely MORE important than is tourism.



Those NGOs who would have SANParks NOT cull their excessive elephant population in Kruger National Park, therefore, and who threaten tourism boycotts if they do so, are turning the whole natural resource management priority list upside down. They are putting tourism and elephants at the top of their priorities. So they are putting the cart before the horse. They are also displaying their monumental ignorance.

I hope that this time round the public debate will go in favour of SANParks. It is time for the ordinary nature-loving public of South Africa to stand behind SANParks and to demand that common sense should, this time, prevail. The country has, for far too long, buckled under the demands and the threats of the animal rights brigade - which, elsewhere in the world, is being ever more rapidly recognised as the biggest confidence industry the world has ever known.

I would commend those who read this article to bring it to the attention of our President, of our Minister of the Environment and Tourism, and of his/her Member of Parliament. It is time our political masters understood that ordinary members of the South African public are concerned at the inordinate animal rights pressures that are being brought to bear on SANParks to force them NOT to implement an essential elephant culling programme.

What can the layman do to express his concern? He can cut this article out of the newspaper and send it to our senior politicians. If they get a huge pile of newspaper cuttings on their desk they will understand that South Africans REALLY ARE concerned.

The elephant culling MUST go ahead in Kruger National Park if SANParks is to have any chance of saving this country's wildlife heritage. ■

Ron Thomson

Anyone who reads this dissertation is at liberty to have it published wherever and whenever they can get a newspaper or a magazine to accept it, or a radio or television station to broadcast it. This message needs to be "spread around" if our wildlife heritage is to be saved.

This article was compiled in accordance with the philosophies expounded in Ron

Thomson's latest book, " A Game Warden's Report".