

CHAPTER 6

POLICY REVIEW PHASE 2A: BROADENING THE SANPARKS CONSULTATION PROCESS (2003 - 2005)

Though the principles underlying the 1999 KNP elephant management plan were approved by the appropriate authorities at the time, it did not attract the political will necessary for it to progress toward an implementation stage. In the period immediately following the plan's approval by SANParks' Board, South Africa entered a process of making a representation to CITES for the downlisting of its elephant population. Later, SANParks and DEAT were involved in hosting two major international events – the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit and the Vth World Parks Congress in 2003. KNP's elephant population grew at close to the lowest rates on record after culling was stopped in 1995. But from 2000 onward this growth rate accelerated, and by 2004 the annual increase in the population was approaching the maximum possible at 7%. The expansion of available elephant habitat through the development of the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park offered an opportunity for a reduction in population through migration or translocation. However, communities in Mozambique, particularly those living along the Shingwedzi River, expressed concern about human-elephant conflict, and Mozambique decided against promoting a rapid increase in the elephant population of Limpopo National Park¹⁷.

Midst growing concern about the size and growth of KNP's elephant population, the debate about elephant management was revived. New leadership of both the Ministry of Environmental Affairs and Tourism and SANParks in 2004 provided the impetus for formal resumption of the policy review process. NEMA, the Protected Areas and Biodiversity Acts laid out options for a policy development and approval process, priorities and imperatives for action, and criteria for public and stakeholder involvement. Under the new legislation the ultimate purpose of the SANParks consultation process was now to produce a report advising the Minister on an elephant management strategy. This new phase of the review sought to engage stakeholders more directly and focused upfront on integration of stakeholder views, values and concerns, and not merely on gauging their reaction to SANParks' proposals.

The Great Elephant Indaba

On 19 October 2004, SANParks officially reopened the public debate about elephant management in South Africa with a three day meeting of over 200 stakeholders in Berg en Dal, KNP. The opportunity to participate in this event was advertised on the internet and in the media. Invitations were also extended to all nature conservation agencies, non-governmental conservation organisations, academic institutions, provincial and national conservation bodies, and interested nature conservation stakeholders in SA and neighbouring countries.

The workshop was structured as a series of presentations, by delegates from across the stakeholder spectrum, on various aspects and views within the debate. This was followed by

breakaway sessions involving separate focus group discussions. The feedback from these smaller groups was then the basis for further discussion within the group as a whole.

The five presentation and discussion sessions focussed on the following topics:

- The conservation, status and future of elephants in protected areas in southern Africa (including opportunities for range expansion and the linking of protected areas to create megaparks).
- Ethics and values (including the animal rights and animal welfare perspective on elephant management options, and legal and procedural basis of the decision-making and approval process).
- Potential impacts of elephant on biodiversity, neighbouring communities and other stakeholders.
- Social impact of protected area management and opportunities for bringing greater benefits to neighbouring communities (including presentations by community representatives from areas around KNP and Addo Elephant National Park).
- Management options and methodologies.

In addition, presentations were made on the status of elephant management in neighbouring countries (by representatives from Namibia, Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe) and by the IUCN African Elephant Specialist Group which presented an overview of current challenges in the conservation and management of Africa's elephants.

The theme of the indaba was expressed as "finding an African solution to an African problem". Participants were asked to avoid reducing the event to a debate about culling, and to give due consideration to all aspects of the decision – including financial limitations, logistics, availability of resources, international and local biodiversity management responsibilities, and the interests of affected parties.

The proceedings of the Indaba have been published¹⁸. Details of the issues raised and views expressed will form part of the synthesis chapter which follows. Some of the diverging views expressed can be summarised as follows:

- Elephant population growth will slow down because of food shortages before any biodiversity is lost.
- A precautionary approach is required to limit the risk of biodiversity loss.
- A single species cannot be favoured at the expense of biodiversity.
- Death by starvation due to habitat degradation could cause suffering worse or equivalent to that of culling.
- Increased fencebreaking by elephant carries the risk of disease transfer to livestock, particularly foot and mouth disease, which could cause huge economic loss for the whole country.
- Communities neighbouring parks experience costs from elephants and other animals which leave parks and should also share in the benefits of parks.
- Contraception is wasteful in that it involves spending resources in order to effectively forgo the potential to benefit from the renewable resource that culled elephants provide.
- Contraception may impact negatively on the social wellbeing of elephants.
- Culling is ethically unacceptable in all circumstances.
- Culling is acceptable as a last resort.
- Tourists will avoid parks where culling takes place.
- Tourists have not avoided parks on account of culling in the past.
- Fire, climate and other herbivores all affect the survival and number of large trees in savannas.

- Impacts of elephants and other factors can only be considered relative to the desired state of a particular park.
- The preservation of vegetation established in the absence of elephants is an unrealistic and unsustainable desired state.

Events organised by stakeholders

Three other large stakeholder events took place within Phase 2 of the policy review process that were not organised by government but by various stakeholder groups themselves.

SANParks Great Elephant Indaba was preceded by a similar event organised by the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) entitled the 'Great Elephant Debate'. On 6 August 2004 WESSA Lowveld hosted an open debate on what they termed "the issue of apparent overpopulation" of elephant in KNP¹⁹. A broad range of speakers was invited, including scientists, vets and community representatives. The debate was attended by over 200 people from all over the country, including national newspaper and television journalists. Issues discussed ranged from potential impacts on neighbouring communities, tree recruitment, biodiversity and potential management options such as range extension, contraception and habitat management. Though SANParks did not make a presentation, the CEO and a team of officials was present and answered questions raised by the speakers and from the floor.

Another major South African stakeholder grouping, the Elephant Managers and Owners Association (EMOA), in collaboration with the provincial agency North West Parks, hosted an elephant symposium at Pilanesberg on 17 September 2004.

Care for the Wild International, Xwe African Wildlife and Justice for Animals convened a workshop in Johannesburg (18-20 July 2005) entitled 'Elephants Alive'. The workshop focused on demonstrating the inappropriateness of culling and the suitability of various non-lethal management options. The workshop involved animal rights groups, scientists, conservationists and legal experts.

Science indaba at Luiperdskloof: 'Elephant and Biodiversity'

A point strongly emphasised at both the WESSA debate and the SANParks Indaba was the need for a process of clarifying the 'evidence'. Concern was expressed that scientists appeared to hold opposing opinions about some of the most fundamental aspects of the debate, which confused the other stakeholders and delayed decision making.

SANParks therefore hosted more than 50 scientists, from a range of disciplines, in a three day workshop in March 2005 to discuss and synthesise current understanding of the role of elephants in ecosystems and of the potential options for their management²⁰. The objectives of this meeting were:

- To develop a framework expressing current thinking on the role of elephant in savanna ecosystems, placing elephants and their activities in the context of all other components, processes and scales.

- To develop a complementary framework for the management of elephant in national Protected Areas under current legislation.
- To relate current SANParks policies to this framework.

Prior to the workshop written submissions were solicited from participants, and any other scientist who felt the need to contribute, in an effort to collate as much knowledge from as wide a range of sources as possible. A group of international University students undertaking field studies in KNP also conducted a very detailed literature survey. Over 300 pages of submissions were then available for the participating scientists to use in their 3 days of deliberations²¹.

Topics discussed included:

- The role of science and scientists in decision making
- Elephant demography
- Elephants and vegetation
- Fire and water distribution as contingencies in elephant/vegetation interactions
- Elephants and biodiversity
- Possible responses to the Elephant “Problem”
- Lines of reasoning around the KNP elephant management plan
- Contraception
- Elephant TPCs in KNP
- A SANParks proposal for a way ahead in Kruger
- Tentative elephant management plans for other national parks: Addo Elephant, Marakele and Mapungubwe National Parks
- An elephant management plan as a learning tool in Adaptive Management
- Ideas for new TPCs in Kruger

Discussions were vigorous, at times heated, but within three days a remarkable consensus emerged on the most important issues, some of which were:

- There is no doubt that elephants have a major impact on their habitat, but there is much uncertainty as to the circumstances under which this impact “matters” in terms of biodiversity conservation.
- Decisions on whether the impact “matters” are highly specific with regard to context and situation, and have to be (a) based on the underlying values determining the desired state of the system and (b) guided as far as possible by a predictive understanding of the relationship between elephant impacts and the desired state. Given the well developed planning framework of the KNP, the KNP elephant management plan is potentially defensible. However it did not receive unqualified support at the workshop for the following interrelated reasons:
 - o No TPCs have yet been exceeded, nor are there clear predictions as to when they may be exceeded. Justification for the plan therefore currently rests entirely on the precautionary principle. SANParks should be reluctant to invoke this principle because it can be used to justify almost any action.
 - o Some of the elephant-related TPCs, which are critical guides to implementation of the elephant management plan, have not been subject to wide scientific scrutiny and do not appear to be well founded in a predictive understanding of the relationship between elephant impacts and the biodiversity objectives.
- The “treatments” of elephant populations proposed in the high and low impact zones of the 1999 KNP elephant management plan do not clearly relate to the biodiversity objectives, and could be regarded as being arbitrary.

An important outcome of the workshop was the agreement to establish a scientific reference group to re-examine and agree on all elephant-related Thresholds of Potential Concern (TPCs) that had been set within the management plan of the KNP and to model them to establish the likelihood of their being exceeded. The timing and nature of interventions to shape elephant impacts in KNP would be advised by the reference group.

The Elephant Management Reference Group met for three days in September 2005 to critically assess the KNP's elephant-related TPCs and determine a way forward for potential revision and refinement of the KNP decision support system into the future. The TPCs were adapted in response to this critique and circulated to workshop participants and a wider audience for scrutiny. The TPCs were again adjusted in response and integrated into a new KNP management plan.

Consultation with communities neighbouring KNP

On 31 March, 1 and 5 of April 2005, workshops were held in the Northern, Central and Southern regions of the KNP with representatives of the communities neighbouring KNP¹⁷. This focused in particular on the 1999 KNP elephant management plan and preliminary zoning proposal for areas of high and low elephant density. One of the objectives of the workshops was to invite suggestions for potential benefits to communities from KNP and particularly elephant management activities. 150, 190 and 129 community members attended the Shingwedzi, Phalaborwa and Berg en Dal workshops respectively, which were also attended by SANParks staff from KNP's Conservation Services, and People and Conservation. Stakeholder groups in attendance included traditional leaders, trusts, Community Property Associations, local forums and local government.

Strong support was expressed for potential reduction of human-elephant conflict in the areas neighbouring low elephant density zones, and for culling as a management option. Should culling need to take place there was agreement that a wide variety of benefits should and could be offered to communities, both directly from consumptive use of culled animals, and indirectly through training and employment in the processing of by-products for KNP. Suggestions were also made about the issue of Damage Causing Animals and the revision of policies governing their control to better protect and benefit communities.

Communities from the central region (predominantly communities neighbouring areas zoned for high elephant impact) expressed two diverging viewpoints: firstly, that the zones should be realigned so that low elephant impact zones extended from north to south in order to create a buffer between communities and elephants; alternatively, that communities could benefit from high elephant numbers, provided adequate safeguards were put in place, and that a mechanism to realise benefits from Damage Causing Animals was created.

Southern African elephant range state meeting

Consultation between southern African elephant range states took place at the African Wildlife Consultative Forum hosted by the Zimbabwe NPWLM at Victoria Falls in May 2005¹⁷. The

primary purpose of the workshop was to reach agreement on a framework for a regional elephant conservation and management strategy. There was recognition of:

- The need to accept culling as one of the management options, but that this should be decided within a framework of clear objectives set for specific areas, including a definitive description of the desired state in terms of specified ecological and socio-economic thresholds or targets.
- The need to apply management measures in accordance with the principle of adaptive management, in the spirit of learning by doing.

SANParks recommendations to the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism

Based on all the events and inputs of the preceding 10 years of engaging both stakeholders and scientists, SANParks submitted a report on an Elephant Management Strategy to the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Forestry on 8 September 2005¹⁷. This recommended that:

- Elephant population management is necessary as a precaution to prevent possible loss of biodiversity.
- In order to maintain biodiversity in national parks, elephant populations must be controlled in some areas and left to fluctuate naturally in other zones of the parks;
- Culling should be approved as one of a range of available management options, along with translocation, contraception and the development of migration corridors.
- Translocation, contraception and use of migration corridors should be applied as medium to long term management options.
- Guidelines (so-called 'Norms and Standards') should be developed to help parks decide when population control is needed, and what measures are best for that specific location;
- Population control measures (such as capture, translocation, contraception or culling) must be overseen by an animal ethics committee; and
- Where culling is necessary, animal products should be utilised to the benefit of local communities.