

TO SUCo and all the other newbies in South Africa.

Subject: The Management of the African Elephant

I have read most of your reports on this subject, reports that have been going the recent rounds on the internet, and I find myself subsiding into a state of melancholy as a result. Everybody, it seems, has his or her own ideas about the management of the African Elephant and I can sense the deep interest in this subject in many of the reports, but also I note an extensive degree of ignorance, too. My impression is that there are some very *interesting* and novel ideas on the subject of elephant management but there are a whole lot of ideas that are way off beam. And I would caution my comrades in this subject to beware of some of those people who purport to be ultra-specialists, people who claim to have caused the *culling* of tens of thousands of elephants (but never did) and who now lament the fact that they supported culling programmes *in the good old days* but who, today, have changed their minds on the subject of elephant culling.

So, lets have a look at the facts of the matter concerning *elephant management*. First of all, elephants live in game reserves (or national parks) that were specifically *set aside* for the maintenance of the local region's overall biological diversity and the custodians of those reserves are charged with *maintaining species diversity* above all else. Nothing else is more important. That means, the game wardens have to acknowledge the fact that, as the elephant population starts to increase in number beyond the sustainable carrying capacity of their habitat, the most palatable of the plants in that habitat become over-utilised. So when the excessive number of elephants get stuck into feeding on those plants, the whole ecosystems begins to change. And it changes drastically. You will ask: How does it change? Basically, it changes because the numbers of edible plants, trees and grasses decline in number and start to disappear. It changes because the physiognomic nature of the vegetation begins to change, too. Big trees are destroyed and not replaced. Grasslands turn into woodlands. Or. woodlands turn into grasslands. Big trees are reduced in number and/or they disappear. This, for example, is starting to happen in Kruger National Park at this very moment and a number of iconic bird species will disappear as a result: Martial Eagles, Bateleur Eagles, Tawny eagles, all the vultures and Ground Hornbills will disappear because the conditions they need for breeding are disappearing. When that starts to happen, the game warden custodians, who have been instructed to *maintain species diversity*, have stopped doing their job properly. And all this is happening right now as I am writing these words.

Everyone one is talking about the need to cull elephants but that is not what is necessary in KRUGER at this point in time. The elephants of

Kruger don't need culling. They need something much more drastic. They need *population reduction management*. They need for their population to be reduced in number down to the sustainable elephant carrying capacity level. I am advised that the elephants of Kruger currently number 34 000. And the sustainable elephant carrying capacity number (Which I calculated) for Kruger, is 3500 (+/- 500). If these numbers are correct, Kruger needs to reduce its elephant population by approximately 33 000. And once we have reduced the numbers down to 3 500 we need to keep the population number's down to that level by annual culling programmes. The management target for elephant populations in South Africa should be 3 500 (+-500). In my considered opinion, the Kruger National Park elephant population has been very badly managed from the very beginning. It is not, however, too late to start doing the right thing even at this late time in the game.

Culling is the activity that man takes to reduce its elephant population number ONLY by the extend of the population's annual increment.

I believe, however, that SANParks needs to discard its *old lady apron* and to allow a new way of thinking. It needs to allow the hunting of inferior bull elephants within the national park boundaries. I believe that those carcasses need to be transported to villages on the outskirts of the park boundaries where the people can prepare, salt, dry and sell the meat themselves. And the people need be taught how to prepare and salt the hides for sale to taxidermists and furniture makers. In the old Rhodesia, we game rangers became well aware of the fact that in an elephant *population-reduction* exercise the value of well-cured elephant hide is infinitely greater than the ivory that we collected.

This whole *management* subject, if it is going to be implemented, needs to be thoroughly debated. But such a debate would be infinitely valuable to the country, and to the people living on the Kruger National Park boundaries.

Just remember that you are not going to get away with a programme that does not include killing elephants. Killing elephants in large numbers is all part of the elephant management game. And you don't need a sophisticated and expensive abattoir to carrying out elephant population reduction exercises.

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