

# ELEPHANT EFFECTS ON BIODIVERSITY; AN ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING AS BASIS FOR ELEPHANT MANAGEMENT IN SANPARKS

## INTRODUCTION TO THE WORKSHOP

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In May of 1995 South African National Parks took a decision to put a moratorium on the culling of elephants in national parks under its management after a public discussion on the matter. South African National Parks (SANParks) has not implemented measures to control elephant populations in national parks for the last ten years, which has led to concern that the expanding populations may cause biodiversity losses, and may also pose a risk to communities adjoining certain parks. In recent months there have been repeated speculations regarding the consequences of this decision on efficient management of the elephant populations and the possible loss of biodiversity in all national parks in which elephants occur.

**SANParks Mission** statement is: *To develop and manage a system of national parks that represents the biodiversity, landscapes and associated heritage assets of South Africa for the sustainable use and benefit of all.*

As a result, SANParks has decided to review its elephant management policy. SANParks believes that all of the following considerations are essential in formulating the management plan: Values & ethics; environmental; social; economic; political & technological.

The biodiversity values that SANparks subscribe to and use for policy formulation are:

- We adopt a **complex systems view** of the world while striving to ensure the **natural functioning** and **long term persistence** of the **ecosystems** under our care.
- We aim at **persistent** achievement of **biodiversity representivity** and **complementarity** to promote **resilience** and ensure **ecosystem integrity**.
- We can **intervene in ecosystems responsibly and sustainably**, but we focus management on **complementing natural processes** under a "**minimum interference**" philosophy.
- We accept with humility the **mandate of custodianship** of biodiversity **for future generations** while recognising that both natural and social systems change over time.
- We ensure continuous learning by practising an adaptive approach to biodiversity research, monitoring and management.

The latter point we regard as being particularly important in the context of elephant management, and our proposed plans centre on learning through management experiments.

Recent legislation governing national parks stipulates that SANParks must consult with interested and affected parties in formulating plans to manage threatened species. Accordingly a workshop (the Great Elephant Indaba) was held at Berg-en-Dal Rest Camp in the Kruger National Park in October 2004 and was attended by more than 200 delegates. The workshop attempted to address these principles by including a series of papers on subjects covering:

- possible impacts of elephants on biodiversity

- the conservation status and the future of elephants in protected areas in southern Africa
- ethics and values
- social impact of protected areas, (potential risks and benefits to neighbours)
- options for managing elephants, (translocation, contraception, culling and others)

At the Elephant Indaba a range of stakeholders (socio-economic, political, animal rights & scientific) was engaged. This however meant that the scientific aspects of elephant management could not be dealt with in any great depth.

A decision was therefore made to specifically engage the scientific community by holding a dedicated scientific workshop that will attempt to:

- Develop a framework of understanding to explain current thinking on the role of elephant in savanna ecosystems, placing elephants and their activities in relation to other components, processes and scales
- Relate current SANParks policies to this framework and decide on what needs to be done in the parks with elephants: Addo, Kruger, Marakele and Mapungubwe.
- Subject the proposed elephant management plans to scientific scrutiny
- Satisfy the need of the scientific community to engage in an evaluation of the SANParks elephant management plan
- Ensure a wide representation of the current scientific opinions that should
  - contextualise the principles of the decision-making process
  - assess current scientific evidence and identify knowledge gaps
  - determine a programme for managing integrative research on elephant impact
  - evaluate possible procedures to execute the management experiments proposed in the elephant management plan.
  - ensure that lessons are learned from the management experiments and incorporated into the management plans and policies

The outcome of the workshop will be summarised in a separate document, that will together with the workshop contributions, represent the scientific stakeholder group in the development of the elephant management plan. A drafting team, which includes external (non-SANParks) experts will develop the final SANParks Elephant Management Plan.

With this approach we hope to make a holistic decision, based not only on environmental, but the full range of socio-economic, political and technical considerations. This will only be achieved if attainable Park objectives are agreed upon with stakeholders with their different perspectives on potential elephant effects. It must be understood that the potential risks will have to be managed in a pro-active manner, using but not abusing the precautionary principle and always taking into account that SANParks, as managing authority, will be responsible for the consequences of all management plans in national parks. The SANParks elephant management plan was to be presented to the minister of Environmental Affairs & Tourism by end April 2005 after which DEAT will circulate it for further public comment. This deadline is no longer valid and elephant management plans now have to be submitted as part of the total Park Management Plans for parks with elephants.