

**MEDIA RELEASE - 24 November 2003**

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**South African National Parks releases report on the investigation relating to the September 2003 leopard attack incident at - Kruger National Park**

FOLLOWING an incident on September 14, 2003 in which a leopard attacked a tour guide near Nsemani Dam in the Kruger National Park ; South African National Parks (SANParks) carried out an internal investigation to determine the circumstances surrounding the attack.

Evidence was collected and studied from eyewitnesses including the tour guide, Mr Henry van Eck from Safaris Direct in Nelspruit , Mpumalanga . The SABC environment programme, 50/50, also made video footage from the incident available to SANParks.

SANParks has concluded from the investigation that the leopard was accustomed to humans - possibly from having been fed before. Our investigation has also found that there was no evidence to suggest that the leopard was injured at the time when it was put down - about half an hour after it had bitten Mr Van Eck on his left leg.

SANParks would like to point out that there was no conclusive evidence found to suggest that the animal was provoked prior to the attack. There was also no evidence found to support the contention that it had been run over by a tourist vehicle as had previously been reported.

As a result of the fact the leopard had already bitten Mr Van Eck, the game ranger, a South African National Parks staff member, acted correctly in putting the animal down as it was by then a threat to the safety of guests and staff. The game ranger acted on instruction from the regional ranger.

Says Dr Freek Venter, SANParks head of conservation services: "When an animal becomes a problem and a danger to our guests, our policy is to destroy such an animal.

"We had no option but to shoot the animal. It had actually bitten a person and we had no guarantee it would not do it again. It was so habituated that it would have been dangerous to other tourists in the future," said Dr Venter.

However, SANParks acknowledges that the field ranger did not follow proper professional guidelines in dealing with the matter. SANParks also concedes that the area could have been cleared first and that the game ranger should not have shot the animal in full view of guests.

In the light of these findings, SANParks will review its policies to find best practice methods of dealing with similar incidents.

Further, SANParks would also like to point out that there are numerous incidents in which members of the public and staff members continue to feed animals inside parks in total disregard of warnings against this practice. Animals therefore become familiar with humans and expect to be fed.

SANParks Chief Executive David Mabunda expressed his appreciation to all members of the public who assisted with information during the investigation. He went on to call on guests to heed the advise not to feed animals in the parks as this posed a serious threat to their safety.

"It is unfortunate that the leopard had to be put down, particularly in full view of guests. However, we are satisfied that the game ranger acted accordingly as he suspected the leopard was a threat to guests and staff.

"I would like to make an impassioned plea to visitors in all our national parks to refrain from feeding animals.

This is a dangerous habit. It encourages animals to be habituated and in the process they expect humans to reciprocate this familiarity - even when humans consider them to be threats to their lives," said Mabunda.

Mabunda referred to the December issue of *Getaway* magazine (Page 19) which showed a picture of a leopard reaching up to a Land Rover full of tourists. The photo was taken at the Sabi Sand Reserve. The Chief Executive of the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa Mr Grant Hine lashed out at this behaviour and said it was unacceptable both from a nature guiding and tourism point of view.

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