Park needs thorough research

Inability to make use of outside advice has diminished PHOTOGRAPH: STEVE LAWRENCE

I have been following the deliberations and statements on elephant culling with considerable interest. The minister of environmental affairs is quite right to consider options with caution.

I was initially relieved when SanParks consulted scientists from outside in dealing with the problem of whether elephants reduce biodiversity within the Kruger National Park and, if so, whether to cull them. I gather from colleagues who attended these earlier meetings that there is not a shred of evidence in papers published in the primary scientific literature that elephants adversely affect biodiversity.

Despite this, the Kruger Park authorities have recommended that numbers be reduced by culling.

One must remember that a culture of culling large game has been inherent in this park since its inception. Colonel Stevenson-Hamilton started it by culling all the species of large carnivores. Later buffalo, wildebeest and zebras were culled because numbers were increasing.

When the latter two species started declining, the park said this was due to predation and culled the lions and hyenas, whereas this was apparently due to changes in the rainfall cycle.

During those times when elephants were also culled, the official policy was to preclude scientists from outside the park from conducting any research on what the park described as "problem" species. Yet the park biologists themselves were at fault by not undertaking fundamental research into the reasons for population increase and decline. There was this feeling that outsiders could teach them nothing. Even recently, discussing elephant culling on SAfm, I heard Dr David Mabunda say the Kruger Park biologists were "practitioners" and therefore knew better how to solve the elephant problem than outside scientists.

A lack of scientific progress continues to hound park policy. I attribute this to a lack of fundamental research, an attitude of "this is our farm and we know the answers" and an inability to consult or accept outside advice, despite fresh winds of change in the latter regard. These policies persist: witness the spread of TB in the buffalo and lion populations despite sound advice on how to contain the spread by experienced state veterinarians; witness also the decline in roan antelope populations.

Elephants depend on water, and the park has put in so many waterholes that there are no longer any natural constraints on the elephant populations. The elephant population in northern Botswana is 10 times that in the Kruger Park, yet devastation of the bush is only apparent along a 2km-wide stretch along the Chobe River where the elephants go to drink.

Perhaps an annual 7 percent rise in the elephant population does pose problems for the Kruger Park. If so we, the public, have a right to know how many projects have been mounted in the past 10 years to investigate the problem and what the results are. After all, the Kruger Park is a national asset, not the exclusive domain of transient employees.

Certainly, contraception on such a large population is impractical and can be applied to restrict growth only in small herds on private game reserves. Perhaps management of water supplies offers a possible solution. Limit the number on the western border of the park and at the same time provide a lot of water points in Mozambique to induce the elephants to emigrate into the neighbouring Transfrontier Park. At the same time, shoot all elephants that break through the park fences bordering populated areas in South Africa and use the funds generated by the sale of products to maintain fences in good order to reduce conflict.

However, reducing the elephants in the park may eventually be necessary. When that time arrives, research on every aspect of elephant biology by university scientists should be encouraged, not only into projects related to elephant management but also purely for the advancement of knowledge.

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