

Bushwise Safaris News Letter Comment– June 2007

We hear, by means of bush telegraph, that the culling of elephants in Kruger is to be re-instated shortly, perhaps within the next six months, after a suspension of several years to assess the situation. The suspension moratorium was introduced by our Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism giving further breathing space to the elephants and further time to the research scientists to try to come up with alternatives to this horrible final solution. But how can one conjure up an alternative solution so quickly when more than 6 billion humans continue their pillage of the planet. It is amazing that the “elephant problem” is at the top of many conservation agendas, whereas it should be the “human problem.”

There are countless factors to be taken into consideration but ultimately it all comes down to space or more specifically habitat. Elephants need space to survive and because of their bulk and primitive digestive systems, needing some 150kg of vegetation to survive each day, they do need a lot of space. Again, because of their bulk, they happen to make a huge impact on their environments, especially when confined, which means impacting on the habitats of other species also struggling for survival.

Humans don't need space just to survive, they want more space to exploit; to extract minerals; to convert to agriculture ; to build cities for their burgeoning population... its all called economic development, the euphemism for exploitation of the natural environment! It's a head to head battle between humans and the evolved habitats of so many fellow creatures in the natural world, and unless viruses or other diseases intercede to dramatically reduce human impact, the elephants as well as the thousands of other species are certainly going to be the losers.

Surprisingly, an estimated 80% of elephants in Africa exist outside of conservation areas (J.Hanks –Africa Geographic vol 14 , no 3) and yet within South Africa, virtually the entire elephant population is confined within National Parks. Greater Kruger is home to some 85% of them and therein lies our dilemma. With a 6% annual population growth, something has to happen! It is not an over reaction. Sooner or later elephants will change the environment and inevitably impact on biodiversity. Should the fences be cut to allow them to wander more freely (if they choose to!), to interact with formal and rural agriculture like the 80% that Dr Hanks refers to, or should they continue to be confined within Kruger with the risks of heavy impacting on this country's last great wilderness area? Birth control and migration or expansion corridors are other future possibilities, but there are obviously time constraints, and it would appear that the pressure is on!

Some very bold decisions are about to be made .

PLW. ... 21-06-2007