

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When the first National Parks were proclaimed in South Africa early in the 20th century only a handful of elephants remained within the country's borders, but ever since then our national elephant population has been growing. Today, South Africa is home to 17 840 elephants, making up 3.8 % of Africa's total population of 490 000. As early as the 1950s, concerns were expressed about the potential impacts of confined elephant populations on their habitats. The first management interventions in South Africa to limit these impacts followed in 1967, when elephants were culled in the Kruger National Park for the first time. When South Africa was accepted back into the international fold in the mid 1990s, SANParks' elephant management policies were questioned by international, and then local, animal rights groups. In response, SANParks agreed to suspend the practice of culling elephants and review both the purpose and methods of elephant management in its national parks. A thorough consultative policy review process sought the views, values, knowledge and experiences of a wide range of local, national and international stakeholders. Contributors have ranged from members of communities neighbouring national parks, to NGOs and international conservation organisations, animal rights and animal welfare groups, national conservation agencies from Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and a host of local and international scientists from a variety of disciplines and institutions.

The review emphasized that issues of elephant management are complex and controversial, involving not only data and expert opinion, but also values, ethics and emotions of stakeholders all over the world. Both research and debate about elephants and their management will go on for a long time, but the process of managing national parks must continue if SANParks is to meet its mandate to conserve biodiversity, and achieve its vision for a system of national parks that are the pride and joy of all South Africans. SANParks therefore developed new biodiversity management plans for all national parks in 2006 and 2007. The plans were based on full consultation with stakeholders and designed to meet the requirements of the National Protected Areas and Biodiversity Acts. Each plan sets out a desired state for the park's ecosystems and a strategy for achieving it. An important component of each plan is the large herbivore management policy. If a park supports elephants – as do Kruger, Addo Elephant, Mapungubwe and Marakele National Parks – then issues of elephant management were incorporated into this herbivore management plan. The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) has since published (February 2008) national Norms and Standards for elephant management which will have important implications for the implementation of elephant management in all private and public conservation areas.

At this juncture in the ongoing debate and policy development process it is fitting to reflect on the path we have travelled and the distance we have covered. What progress have we made in exploring and understanding the issues and interests at stake, and how has this influenced the way SANParks incorporates elephant management into its plans? This publication is a synthesis of the processes followed and outcomes achieved in South Africa over the last 12 years. Exposing this history to a wide audience presents an opportunity to place SANParks' current philosophy and approach to conservation management, with particular emphasis on elephants, on the table. We look forward to learning from any discussions, debate, research and new insights that emerge as a result. Our management can only be the better for it!