

A national elephant heritage strategy for South Africa

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Abstract

Because of its global status as well as its conservation dependence, the African elephant requires national attention. Within South Africa, the Norms and Standards for the Management of Elephants, provide a ‘how to’ tool, but these do not define a national common vision for elephant conservation, nor provide a broader understanding of the role of elephants in society. South Africa thus urgently needed an overarching strategy. Following a whole of society co-development consultation process, the wide range of values and expectations held by a diverse set of stakeholders was realized. While the National Elephant Heritage Strategy includes key elements required by typical conservation planning, the strategy focuses on achieving South African societal aspirations for elephants, including promoting a sustainable intergenerational legacy for all. The strategy provides a framework for planning and decision-making around living landscapes with elephants, which maximizes all values that elephants contribute to South Africans while mitigating risks to people and the environment, through a common vision, goals and key actions. The strategy broadens beyond conserving populations of the species, to a contextualization of the role of elephants in society.

We describe the approach and process followed in the co-development of the strategy and key outcomes. This process and approach can inform other national conservation strategies to better align with the different value systems and whole of society principles encapsulated within the Global Biodiversity Framework.

Keywords: African savanna elephant, *Loxodonta africana*, co-development, societal aspirations, living landscapes.

Introduction

African savanna elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) play key roles in African ecosystems and provide global intergenerational benefits. Within South Africa, they live in large populations shared with neighbouring countries, as well as in many small reserves (Delsink, van Altena, Schulman & Bertschinger, 2023; Selier, Henley, Pretorius & Garaï, 2016). Many reserves with elephants are surrounded by land uses incompatible with elephants, leading to the installation of fences to restrict elephant movements. Free-roaming elephants occur in transboundary parks and surrounding areas within Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal (Scholes & Mennell 2008; Vanak, Thaker & Slotow, 2010; Selier *et al.*, 2016).

African elephants shape their ecosystems and influence the physical environment, benefiting

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other species (Carignan & Villard 2002; Bunney, Bond & Henley, 2017; Fritz 2017). People value elephants for many reasons including the benefits provided to tourists, rural communities, and society at large (van de Water, Henley, Bates & Slotow, 2022). Elephants, however, can also pose risks to biodiversity, damage property, and conflict with people. Balancing the benefits of elephants and costs of living with them is a complex trade-off challenge.

South Africa regulates the management of elephants through enabling legislation and national norms and standards (Government Gazette No. 30833, 29 February 2008), but a shared vision for elephant conservation and sustainable use amongst its citizens is lacking. The African Elephant Action Plan has a continental focus and a traditional conservation approach, that guides the aspirations of African elephant range states. South Africa, however, is a nation of diverse cultures, with a historical legacy of social injustices. Many citizens still have no access to cultural, spiritual and other values of elephants, and are excluded from decision-making pro-

cesses concerning elephants (van de Water *et al.*, 2023; Queiros, 2019).

The aim of a National Elephant Heritage Strategy is to guide the integration of the aspirations of all South Africans concerning elephants and their role in enhancing the well-being of people and nature alike.

Consistent with the Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD, 2022), the strategy took a whole of society approach in its development, engaging over 1300 representatives and members of key stakeholder groups including communities, traditional leaders and health practitioners, private sector, academics, and members of national and provincial government. (Table 1). Stakeholders provided input on values and aspirations they associate with elephants. Weighing the values most frequently expressed by stakeholders and considering the interests and potential impacts elephants may have on these groups (Table 2), resulted in a collective aspiration, then captured in the vision.

Stakeholders provided further input through a second round of consultation that helped identify

Table 1. Organizations that are involved in developing and implementing various aspects of the National Elephant Heritage Strategy.

National governments and their entities

- Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
- Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD)
- Department of International Relations and Cooperation
- Department of Tourism
- South African National Biodiversity Institute
- South African National Parks
- Simangaliso Wetland Park
- Provincial Government and their Entities
- Eastern Cape Province: Department of Economic Development, Environmental Affairs and Tourism
- Gauteng Province: Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
- Limpopo Province: Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism
- North West Province: Department of Economic Development, Environment, Conservation and Tourism
- CapeNature
- Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency
- Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife
- Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency
- North West Parks and Tourism Board

Community organizations and programmes

- People and Parks Forum
- Traditional Health Practitioners and Healers Organizations
- Traditional Leaders Academic Institutions
- University of Pretoria
- University of Oxford
- University of the Witwatersrand
- University of Cape Town
- University of Kwazulu-Natal

Table 1 (continued)**Non-government organizations; industry; research & wildlife sector**

- African Parks
- Confederation of Hunting Associations of South Africa (CHASA)
- Custodians of Professional Hunting and Conservation South Africa (CPHC)
- Elephants Alive
- Elephant Specialist Advisory Group (ESAG)
- Humane World for Animals (HSI)
- National Council of Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (NSPCA)
- Professional Hunters Association of South Africa (PHASA)
- Elephant owners and reserve managers
- South Africa Hunting and Game Conservation Association (SAHGCA)
- South African Veterinary Association (SAVA)
- Wildlife ACT
- Wildlife Forum
- Wildlife Ranching South Africa (WRSA)

Table 2. Key stakeholder values, ranked by number of groups that scored each value, and then weighted by level of impact of elephants on stakeholder groups.

Values	Sum	Weighted by stake-holder group	Sum rank	Weighted rank
Access to elephants & their derivatives and the environment of elephants	7	13.7	15	1
Global service by saving or looking after elephants (world saying thank you)	2	13.5	38	2
Learning from other countries / systems / indigenous knowledge, African solutions	6	13.3	21	3
Devolution of decision-making (principle)	5	13.2	27	4
Education and awareness	7	13	16	5
Existence value	5	12.8	28	6
The need to change our thinking & approaches; respect different thinking (think about a range of land uses and approaches)	7	12.4	17	7
Coexistence between elephants and people (compensation)	10	12.4	4	8
Equality of benefits, costs, responsibility & reduce gender inequality (communities as co-managers/partners/coexistence of people/ co-ownership)	10	12.2	5	9
Elephants not a problem	1	12	41	10
Benefit communities (local farming communities, rural, etc.); local context, tenure	13	11.5	1	15
Communication & messaging	13	11.5	2	16
Pride and honour in our elephant heritage	11	11.6	3	14
Constitutional mandate (transformation, and fair environmental justice (equitability))	10	11.9	6	11

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Table 2 (continued)

Values	Sum	Weighted by stake-holder group	Sum rank	Weighted rank
Speak to SDGs (careers associated with elephants; social economic development)	10	11.5	7	17
Viable, thriving populations that incl persistence of species, range expansion & development of corridors	10	11.5	8	18
Recognizing all values associated with elephants	10	11.5	9	19
Converting from problem to benefit (elephants) (species focus vs system focus)	10	9.9	10	37

key activities to achieve the goals and enablers that capture specific values expressed by stakeholders, and outcomes which contribute to achieving the goals of the White Paper on the conservation and sustainable use of South Africa’s Biodiversity (Government Gazette (No. 48785) 14 June 2023).

The vision ‘*Resilient elephant populations help nature thrive, support cultural and spiritual tradi-*

tions, and give South Africans fair and inclusive chances to live well now and in the future’ has three core elements: environmental outcomes and the influence that elephants can have on these; economic outcomes and how elephants can contribute to these; and social outcomes that embrace all the values of elephants, including their cultural and spiritual importance (Fig. 1). The vision is aspirational, aiming to do better than just achiev-

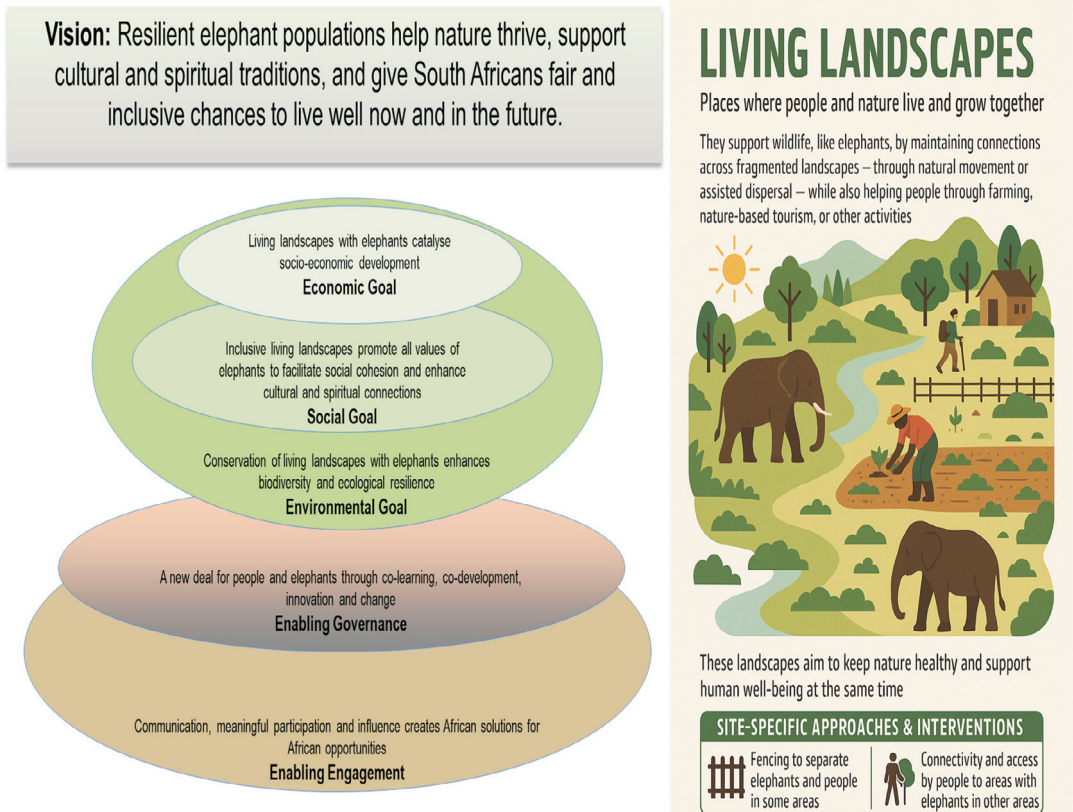


Fig. 1. Diagrammatic summary of South Africa’s National Elephant Heritage Strategy.

ing resilience, rather encompassing restorative and regenerative practices that enhance and build up the world's natural and social capital.

This strategy intends to achieve the outcomes of: (1) The thriving people, nature and elephants are considered and realized; (2) Expanded, connected, thriving, conservation areas conserve viable populations of elephants in living landscapes; (3) Financial support and incentives are harnessed and leveraged from all sources to ensure the biodiversity sector is adequately resourced and transformed; (4) Improved livelihoods and well-being of local communities, through meaningful participation and increased and more inclusive access and fair benefit sharing; (5) The value and integrity of elephants as a key component of African traditional culture and spirituality is restored; (6) Improved governance, co-management and partnerships, and contribution to the biodiversity economy, with meaningful community participation, influence and benefit, and empowerment as equal and influential participants, leading transformation of the biodiversity sector; and (7) Clear understanding of the intent and aspirations of South Africa, in promoting the conservation and management of elephants and their landscapes for the well-being of people and nature.

The strategy provides a framework for planning and decision-making around living landscapes with elephants, and should guide the development, revision and implementation of strategies, frameworks, and tools, such as the Norms and Standards for the Management of Elephants in South Africa, the National Elephant Research Strategy, Elephant Management Plans, National Elephant Meta-Population Framework, and engagements regarding elephants in relevant consultative fora, *etc.* The National Elephant Heritage Strategy embraces evidence-based elephant management and seeks to adapt approaches upon reflection and learning.

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- South African National Parks (SANParks)
- Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife

- Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET)
- University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)
- Welgevonden Nature Reserve

Groups and individuals participating in the consultations, including representatives from the:

- National and Provincial House of Traditional Leaders
- Traditional Health Practitioners
- National Committee of People and Parks
- Elephant owners and managers
- Elephant specialists and academics
- Conservation NGOs which have interest in elephants
- State officials from national and provincial departments and entities with conservation mandates
- Provincial People and Parks committees representing communities living adjacent to:
 - Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park
 - uMkhuze Game Reserve
 - Kruger National Park
 - Addo Elephant National Park
 - Pilanesberg National Park
 - Tembe Elephant Park
 - Ithala Game Reserve
 - Madikwe Game Reserve

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