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By David Blair in Kruger National Park

(Filed: 30/11/2005)

The swirling waters of the Letaba river, reddened by the earth of South Africa's bush veldt, are an oasis for elephants who drink and frolic in a current swollen by summer rains.

These elephants have the good fortune to inhabit the Kruger National Park, one of Africa's largest and best protected expanses of wilderness.

Yet if the park management has its way, they will soon be hunted down by helicopters, driven into an isolated area and shot.

South Africa's premier national park, with a million visitors a year, has asked for permission to cull its 14,000-strong elephant herd for the first time since culling was suspended across the country 11 years ago.

A mammal whose very survival was once in question - and for whose protection the world imposed a total ban on the ivory trade - may soon be killed by the thousand.

Any visitor to Kruger's rugged bush country can see why this might be necessary. Elephants are careless, wasteful and destructive eaters and trails of debris advertise their presence.

Their favoured areas are littered with the smashed trunks of uprooted mopane trees. Those trees left standing are often stripped of their bark, leaving exposed trunks to turn a vivid shade of silver and die.

The Kruger may cover more than 7,500 square miles, but it cannot cope with an elephant population that doubles every 10 years. David Mabunda, chief executive of the national parks board, has decided that culling is the answer.

"It is recommended that application of lethal means, specifically culling, be approved," he wrote in an official report, adding that the situation is so urgent that clearance "should not be delayed beyond March 2006".

South Africa's conservationists believe they have only a few months to save thousands of elephants. Kruger Park can cope with no more than 7,500.



A ranger takes aim at elephants during the last cull in Kruger Park

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If this figure still holds - and the government has not confirmed that it does - some 6,500 elephants will have to be shot.

"They're going to leave elephants lying in pools of blood all over Kruger," said Lawrence Anthony, founder of the Earth Organisation, a local conservation group.

"Objections from animal rights groups overseas will be so big. What will the impact on tourism be? That's a crucial question."

Elephants have strong attachments to one another and famously visit the bones of their dead. Critics ask whether a cull might render the survivors dangerous.

"Elephants become traumatised, they have long memories and they react. What is going to be the reaction of the remaining traumatised elephants to the tourists?" asked Mr Anthony.

"We don't know the answer. Do the national parks board have a study on this? We say that it's irresponsible to go ahead without this study."

Conservationists offer a series of alternatives to culling. Helicopter-borne game rangers could fire darts laced with non-hormonal contraceptives into female elephants. These drugs render them sterile for at least two years.

Moreover, there is no conclusive evidence to show that elephants are inflicting irreparable harm on vegetation.

"There isn't a shred of hard, scientific evidence behind that," said Ian Raper, president of the Southern African Association for the Advancement of Science.

But aerial photographs show areas of Kruger rendered almost devoid of vegetation. The park says that it cannot wait for conclusive evidence proving that this damage is both irreparable and inflicted by elephants.

The final decision on whether or not to cull rests with Marthinus van Schalkwyk, the environment and tourism minister, who holds the fate of the great elephant herds beside the Letaba in his hands.

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