forestry, fisheries & the environment

Department:
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

SPEECH BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER NAREND SINGH:

SOUTHERN AFRICAN ELEPHANT INDABA: "People and Elephants, Thriving Together"

12 – 13 AUGUST 2025 - KWAZULU-NATAL

Programme Director, Mr Shonisani Munzhedzi, CEO of SANBI

Honourable Members of Parliament

MEC of the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs of KwaZulu-Natal, Rev Buthelezi

North West MEC for Economic Development, Environment, Tourism and Conservation, Ms Lenkopane

His Royal Highness Prince Bambindlovu

Secretariat and esteemed representatives from the South African Development Community (SADC)

Chairperson of the National House of Traditional and Khoi San Leaders, Kgosi Sethlolo

All Traditional Leaders present

Heads of Departments for Environment present

Chief Executive Officer of EKZNW, Mr Mkhize, CEOs and executives

Esteemed guests from across our Southern African elephant range states, Community representatives, Traditional Health Practitioners,

Conservation practitioners, NGOs, industry partners, and members of the media,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour to welcome you to this landmark gathering - the Southern African Elephant Indaba - held under the theme, *“People and Elephants, Thriving Together.”*

The fact that we convene on *World Elephant Day 2025* is no coincidence—it is a deliberate and powerful statement. This day, under the theme *Matriarchs and Memories,* is observed across the globe to honour the ecological importance, cultural meaning, and conservation needs of elephants. By gathering here, in Southern Africa—the region that holds over half of the continent’s elephants—we are placing our voices, our strategies, and our shared commitments directly in the global spotlight. It signals to the country and to the world that we recognise both our responsibility and our opportunity: to safeguard this keystone species not only as a natural heritage, but as a living bridge between our past, our present, and the future we wish to create.

Today is more than a meeting—it is a declaration that Africa’s elephants, and the communities who live alongside them, deserve nothing less than our united action.

The African savanna elephant is far more than the largest land mammal on Earth. It is a keystone species whose movements shape our landscapes, whose presence signals ecosystem health, and whose image carries cultural and spiritual weight across our communities. In South Africa, elephants are part of our national heritage—immortalised in rock art, embedded in folklore, and featured on our currency. For many, they symbolise wisdom, memory, resilience, and to some- they bring the rain.
However, there is another truth we must face: elephants are both revered and resisted. They are celebrated in our stories but feared in the lived realities of many rural families.

In recent years, human-elephant conflict has shifted from isolated incidents to a pressing socio-ecological crisis in parts of our country and across the region. Over the past months, I have seen first-hand the growing challenge of human–elephant conflict in provinces such as Limpopo, North West, Mpumalanga, and KwaZulu-Natal—particularly in

areas bordering Kruger National Park, iSimangaliso Wetland Park, and our Transfrontier Conservation Areas—communities have shared with us their painful realities:

- Fields of maize or sugarcane flattened overnight
- Boundary fences pushed down
- Water infrastructure damaged during dry spells
- And, tragically, the loss of human lives—lives that cannot be replaced.

For a child who must walk to school in the early morning, the presence of an elephant nearby is not awe-inspiring, it is terrifying. For a farmer whose only source of income is destroyed in a single night, the elephant represents not opportunity, but economic ruin.

This conflict is not a failure of the elephants. Elephants, like many living forms of life, and like us, are naturally drawn to places that offer them water, food and safety. The challenges are a reflection of broader pressures: expanding human settlements, competition for land and water, climate change impacts, habitat fragmentation, and insufficient conflict-prevention systems; and if left unaddressed, it risks eroding community trust in conservation, weakening regional cooperation, and undermining decades of protection efforts.

In May this year, during my visit to Mpumalanga with SANParks, the Mpumalanga Tourism & Parks Agency, and community representatives, we conducted an aerial survey over affected areas. What I saw was deeply concerning: hundreds of homes and community structures built within designated buffer zones—land specifically intended to separate people from high-risk wildlife areas. When these safety zones are ignored, conflict is inevitable. Proving exactly that zones exist for a reason—I witnessed Elephants targeting mango trees—the very source of livelihood for many—creating direct competition between humans and wildlife for food. I also saw how water, available only at the fence lines, was drawing elephants dangerously close to these settlements.

This is a reality we must confront honestly—it means responsibility must be shared—government, conservation agencies, and communities all

have a role to play in managing the risks. A few days later, I briefed the Portfolio Committee as the same story played out elsewhere—in KwaZulu-Natal's Mawana Game Reserve, where unrest has been triggered by elephants roaming beyond reserve boundaries. In North West's Madikwe Game Reserve, recent incidents mirror these challenges. In Limpopo's Mapungubwe area, the pressures are no different.

The message is clear: this is a national challenge, not a provincial one. High elephant populations, human settlement in high-risk zones, insufficient deterrents, and fragmented responses are placing both communities and elephants in danger.

Our priority should be to strengthen community participation, to ensure the **protection of human life and infrastructure**.

I recall a discussion I had with a scientist from India who visited the department some months back—he shared practical approaches that have worked in their own elephant conflict zones—such as creating water wells for elephants away from human settlements, and planting specific vegetation that naturally draws elephants to safe zones. If these solutions work in other countries, should we not be bold enough to adapt and apply them here in South Africa?

The Southern African Elephant Indaba:
That is why this Indaba is so important. It is not merely about managing elephant numbers or fencing off protected areas. It is about rebuilding relationships:

- Between people and nature.
- Between traditional wisdom and modern science.
- Between local voices and national policy.

Over the next two days, we aim to:

- Build a shared understanding of elephant management and conflict mitigation across Southern Africa.
- Strengthen cooperation among SADC elephant range states, particularly through our Transfrontier Conservation Areas such as the Great Limpopo and Lubombo.

- Identify practical, science-based, and community-led interventions for coexistence and importantly to
- Develop a **concrete regional action plan** that benefits both people and elephants—ensuring that coexistence is more than just a slogan; that action is taken.

Programme Director,

South Africa has long been a leader in conservation. Our history includes the recovery of species from the brink of extinction, the establishment of some of the largest protected areas in Africa, and the co-development of the Transfrontier Conservation vision. But leadership today requires more than fences and formal reserves—it demands that we place human dignity, equity, and justice at the heart of conservation.

Our policies reflect this shift. The White Paper on Conservation and Sustainable Use of South Africa's Biodiversity and the draft National Elephant Heritage Strategy—both developed through extensive consultations since 2018, which will be published in the coming months, calls for inclusivity, transformation, ethical wildlife management, and meaningful benefit-sharing with communities.
We must commit to proactive, not reactive solutions. Some of which we will explore over the next 2 days are:

- Early warning systems using technology and community patrols
- Locally developed deterrents
- Equitable benefit-sharing from tourism and biodiversity enterprises, ensuring rural communities gaining from the elephants they live alongside
- Stronger partnerships with traditional authorities and local knowledge holders, whose understanding of the land and its dynamics is invaluable

And as we consider solutions, we must remember this simple truth—elephants have a remarkable way of finding their homes. Any strategy we implement must take this into account, ensuring that our interventions respect their natural instincts while protecting both people and wildlife.

We must also restore the intangible value of elephants. In South Africa, elephants are not merely wildlife—they are part of our ancestral landscapes. In the worldviews of many traditional communities, elephants are considered messengers, protectors, or symbols of strength. Losing them would mean more than the loss of a species; it would mean a severing of cultural ties passed down through generations.

As we gather at this Indaba, it is essential that we emerge not only with a shared understanding of the challenges before us but with clear, actionable responses—both general strategies and specific solutions tailored to the unique issues faced in identified and 'hot-spot' areas.

On this ***Day,*** let us commit to:

- Listening to the lived experiences of communities.
- Applying science with compassion.
- Sharing resources and knowledge regionally.
- Acting with urgency, because both people and elephants cannot wait.

World Elephant Day is about celebration—but here, today, it is also about commitment. If we truly want to protect our people, conserve our elephants, and create a future of coexistence, then accountability cannot be optional.

Let us leave this Indaba not with promises, but with a plan—and the determination to see it through.

I thank you