WORLD ELEPHANT DAY
THE SOUTH AFRICAN ELEPHANT INDABA 2025:
"People and Elephants, Thriving Together"

Introduction

The Wildlife Animal Protection Forum of South Africa (WAPFSA) was invited to attend the Southern African Elephant Indaba organized and hosted by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) on 12th and 13th August 2025. WAPFSA graciously accepted the invitation to attend the Indaba which was held at the Bonamanzi Game Reserve which borders onto the Hluhluwe River in Northern KwaZulu Natal.

The motivation for the title and subject matter of the Indaba was introduced by Deputy Minister Singh during the DFFE Budget Vote on 27th June 2025. Minister Singh stated that DFFE would convene a high-level Elephant Indaba bringing together traditional leaders, local communities, conservation experts, private sector stakeholders, academia, and all levels of government to address the complex issue of human elephant conflict in South Africa.

According to Singh: "*Human-wildlife conflict, particularly with elephants, is an escalating issue in South Africa. As elephant ranges shrink and climate change reduces key resources, these animals increasingly move into human settlements in search of food and water bringing them into direct conflict with communities. At the same time, population growth, urban expansion, and rural development are encroaching on wildlife habitats. The result is a dangerous overlap that threatens both human safety and conservation goals.*"

Key Issues Raised in Government Speeches

The KwaZulu-Natal Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) MEC, Reverend Thulasizwe Buthelezi, highlighted that:

- The Indaba is a crucial gathering in our collective efforts to preserve our rich culture, nature, and heritage.
- As we address the current threats to our elephant population, I am pleased that we have Amakhosi among us as the leaders of the communities who must be part of the solution.
- The Indaba will discuss ways to protect elephants and involve communities in conservation.
- There are profound cultural ties that bind our communities to the majestic African elephant. From the green hills of Zululand's reserves to the sweeping coastal plains of Maputaland, elephants are intertwined into the very fabric of our living landscapes. In our culture, the elephant holds a respected place, reflected in the royal salute, "Bayede, Wena we Ndlovu," which honours our King and symbolises strength and leadership.
- The theme of this Indaba, "People and Elephants, Thriving Together," calls us to transcend conflict and embrace coexistence. The African elephant is not merely a keystone species, shaping ecosystems and sustaining biodiversity, but also a powerful symbol of our history, spirituality, and identity. As the isiZulu proverb reminds us, "Akukho ndlovu yasindwa umboko wayo": an elephant is not burdened by its own head, reflecting the strength, dignity, and resilience we must embody in our conservation efforts. For many, particularly abakwaNdlovu, the elephant is a sacred clan totem, embodying leadership, wisdom, and unity.
- Elephants, as the largest land mammals, hold ecological, cultural, and economic significance in South Africa. They are part of the Big Five and must be protected. While some African countries have seen elephant populations decline, southern Africa has witnessed growth, thanks to stronger protection measures.
- While there has generally been peaceful coexistence between communities and reserves, tensions can arise. The government must ensure these relationships remain strong. Communities should be ambassadors and the first line of defence against poachers.
- This Indaba is a timely opportunity to share knowledge, draw on diverse experiences, and craft ethical, sustainable, and inclusive strategies that safeguard elephants while prioritising communities around our protected areas.

- The relationship between rural communities and game reserves must be strengthened and that communities see themselves as part of conservation.
- Future generations should enjoy the beauty of our province through the preservation of these magnificent animals.
- Limited space, restricted access to resources, and genetic isolation threaten elephant populations. We have seen disturbing incidents which went viral on social media where elephants that stray into nearby communities are killed, sometimes for meat. This calls for united action between government, organisations, communities, and Amakhosi."

The Indaba's keynote address was delivered by Deputy Minister Singh.

"*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. 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*."

Human Elephant Conflict

Human elephant conflict describes negative interactions between humans and elephants. In South Africa this often occurs when the fences that are meant to contain the elephants are not maintained or when the community deliberately removes the fencing.

The most common forms of conflict are when the elephants eat or destroy crops, inadvertently, because of their size and strength, destroy property and income. In some instances, elephants get too close to humans which can trigger defensive behaviours that may lead to injury or death of people and elephants. These conflicts are serious and endanger people's safety and the survival of elephants.

Elephants are mega-herbivores that eat up to 150 kilograms of forage and drink up to 190 litres of water a day. They must navigate over large areas to find enough food and water to survive. The land that they depend upon is transforming due to growing human needs and a changing climate.

All three remaining elephant species are on the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species. The African forest elephant is critically endangered, and the African savannah elephant and the Asian elephant are listed as endangered.

Human elephant conflict in the Mwana area of KwaZulu Natal was highlighted in a presentation to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee meeting held on the 20th May 2025 by Mr Xolani Msimango, a representative of the Mwana community. Deputy Minister Singh stated during this committee meeting that he would take a personal interest in this matter.

Deputy Minister Singh said during his keynote address at the Indaba "*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. 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."

Mr Xolani Msimango attended the Indaba and had opportunity to voice his concern for the community he represents in Mwana. The human elephant conflict in this particular area is, according to Mr Msimango, complex because it involves elephants who live on privately owned land where the fences have not been maintained. It seems that the owner of the land is unable to repair or restore the fences. These elephants have crossed into the Mwana community from time to time. There have been reported injuries and losses to community land and to their livelihoods. Some of these elephants have been killed under permit by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife authorities.

Community representatives voiced their utter frustration at the Indaba but overall it is unfortunate, unhelpful and of grave concern that despite the visual evidence of communities living in close proximity to elephants in various regions of South Africa there are no independent or any available studies, peer reviewed reports or verified evidence or even concise statistics on the details of incidents of elephant human conflict in South Africa.

The Argument Presented by North West Province to Cull Elephants at Madikwe

Elephants play a critical ecological role as ecosystem engineers, and their long-term survival remains vital to biodiversity and environmental balance.

The Indaba provided a platform for representatives of the Sustainable Use Coalition, Professional Hunters Association, the Confederation of Hunting Associations of South Africa and SA Hunters and Game Conservation Association who ignored the theme of the Indaba "**People and Elephants, Thriving Together"** to question the validity of the South African Elephant Norms and Standards and the absence of quotas for the export of hunting trophies. Recently, the accuracy of reports from the True Green Alliance and the Sustainable Use Coalition about elephant numbers and the alleged ecological devastation at Madikwe Game Reserve in the North West Province were publicly questioned.

The MEC for Economic Development, Conservation, Environment and Tourism, Ms Bitsa Lenkopane, stated during her address at the Indaba that there is an overabundance of elephants at Madikwe which is causing mounting pressure on the fences at Madikwe which could be devastating for the reserve and community.

She reminded the attendees that "elephants can be hunted, culled and can be translocated". Ms Bitsa Lenkopane also proudly mentioned during her address the fact that she led the North West Province delegation at the Dallas Safari Club Convention which took place in Atlanta Georgia where she stated that she represented South Africa emphasising the importance of sustainable wildlife utilisation.

Jonathan Denga, acting Chief Executive Officer of the North West Parks and Tourism Board, addressed the Indaba where he also stated that Madikwe has too many elephants. He has also previously stated that the realistic options for Madikwe are the contraception and lethal reduction (hunting and culling) of elephants.

However, one has to question if the communities true voices are really ever heard. The content of a 2008 thesis titled Nature and Power: A Critique of 'People-Based Conservation' at South Africa's Madikwe Reserve suggested that the communities living alongside Madikwe believed that the major role of the Reserve should be to expose local school children to its conservation and tourism operations, to educate and encourage them in order that one day they might command top jobs within the Reserve. They argued that it was only through the long-term investment in future generations that local residents would ever truly benefit from and become significant partners in the Madikwe project.

It must be noted that the NSPCA made a strong statement on the 13th August 2025 titled: Conservation or Convenience? Why Madikwe's Elephants Deserve Better. The NSPCA visited Madikwe during the so-called crisis in 2024 when, during the drought, a number of elephants unfortunately died. "Elephants are sentient, intelligent beings with intricate social structures and emotional lives. Any policy that positions the culling or hunting of elephants as the most "realistic" course of action must be rigorously questioned, not only in terms of conservation science but with regard to its ethical underpinnings. As the statutory body tasked with upholding animal welfare across South Africa, the National Council of SPCAs (NSPCA) cannot allow such proposals to pass without scrutiny. While it is true that Madikwe's elephant population has grown substantially within the confines of a fenced reserve – far beyond the original population design of 250 – the suggestion that the solution lies in killing off animals to fund conservation is both deeply troubling and short-sighted. Lethal reduction, whether in the form of culling or so-called trophy hunting, cannot be repackaged as an income stream to plug holes in long-neglected management systems.

The commodification of wildlife under the guise of “sustainable utilisation” erodes not only the ethical foundation of conservation, but also South Africa’s international reputation as a country committed to humane and responsible environmental stewardship. Mr Jonathan Denga is both Acting CEO of the Board and Director for Biodiversity Management and Conservation in the North West province, with 25 years of experience in the field. The elephant population at Madikwe did not occur overnight, it developed under long-term watch. Responsibility for both the state of the reserve and the solutions put forward now cannot be separated from the tenure and oversight of those in leadership. Culling used as a tool, with the implication of economic benefits as a reason to favour it is a dangerous precedent. Culling must never be used to generate income. If culling were to occur – as a last resort only – it must be conducted by professional, independent wildlife veterinarians and specialist teams trained to minimise suffering. The NSPCA will not permit “pot-shots” by trophy hunters under the banner of population control. Nor will we stand by while decades of negligence are financially rewarded through the monetisation of dead elephants.”

WAPFSA Input at the Indaba

WAPFSA participated in group 1 during the workshop session of the Indaba suggesting that:

- an urgent study or census be conducted of all the fences in South Africa in particular where there are so called hotspots of human elephant conflict.
- Urgent solutions must be found to fund the rebuilding of the fences properly, these fences should also be monitored, this could be a form of job creation.
- Reserves whether private or state must be held responsible for the maintenance of the fences.
- If communities are actively destroying the fences they too must be held liable.
- If elephants escape from these reserves whether private or state owned the reserves must be held liable for the payment of damages to the communities.
- The communities must in turn respect buffer zones and be held accountable if they do not.
- Alternative methods such as advanced drone technology must be used, such as that which is being used in Tanzania, to successfully mitigate human elephant conflict. The drones drive the elephants away from crops and villages.

- An urgent, independently verifiable study must be conducted and collected on all incidents of human elephant conflict in South Africa without this valuable information it is impossible to mitigate or find sustainable long-term solutions in order that people and elephants can thrive together.

Conclusion

The Wildlife Animal Protection Forum of South Africa (WAPFSA) is a national network of twenty-eight South African environmental and conservation organizations established in 2017 with a particular emphasis on wild animal protection expertise.

WAPFSA is explicitly designed as a vehicle to engage with governments on the issue of the conservation, wellbeing and protection of wild animals and the natural environment in which they live. Our policy positions are based on robust science, ethical and compassionate conservation practices and harmonious co-existence within nature.

WAPFSA's activities are underpinned by an understanding that the inter-relationship between environmental protection, animal well-being, conservation and the values of dignity, compassion and humaneness are foundational to our constitutional democracy. WAPFSA also advocate for the concepts of UBUNTU, the intrinsic value of wild animals and an integrative policy approach.

WAPFSA looks forward to receiving the official copy of the Southern African Elephant Indaba Report. WAPFSA has volunteered to assist the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment on the associated expert task teams.

For further information contact: administrator@wapfsa.org