WILDLIFE ANIMAL PROTECTION FORUM
SOUTH AFRICA

APPEAL TO MINISTER DION GEORGE TO PHASE OUT CAPTIVE ELEPHANT FACILITIES THAT OFFER INTERACTIONS WITH HUMANS

WAPFSA hereby appeals to the Honourable Minister George, to facilitate an independent and public review of the captive elephant industry in South Africa with the view of the phasing out of captive elephant facilities that offer interactions with humans after the recent deaths at the HERD elephant facility in Hoedspruit.

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.

There is a critical mass of indisputable scientific data and research on ***who*** Elephants are and the conditions under which they thrive. Unfortunately, despite this, there are a number of facilities in South Africa that allow full contact interactions with captive elephants. Close contact tourism activities raise significant human safety and elephant welfare and well-being concerns and pose dangers for humans and Elephants alike.

Not only are Elephants a keystone species and are an essential component of ecosystems, they are sentient beings who live socially complex lives through relationships which radiate out from a mother-offspring bond through families, clans, and sub populations.

Independent males form long-term friendships. Elephants communicate through more than 300 gestures, complex speech and glandular secretions. They contemplate, negotiate, collaborate, plan and are aware of death. They care about their lives. In nature they roam

across long distances and different habitats and spend almost three-quarters of their lives acquiring necessary and different nutrients. The physical activity and mental stimulation involved in the search for food items across large landscapes constitutes the very core of an elephant's interest and survival.

Elephants share with humans the same vulnerability to trauma. They can experience psychological and social breakdown. Trauma spreads from parent to child, neighbour to neighbour. Symptoms include depression, fear, panic, flashbacks, nightmares, aggression, infanticide and violence against others and self. Trauma also profoundly undermines their immune system and physiological functions.

Elephants are sentient, self-determined, self-aware, highly cognitive animals who require access to large, complex, stimulating ecological and social environments. Consequently, they need to be given the freedom to exercise choice over their movements, foraging options and companions. Elephants are particularly ill-suited to active hands-on human control and, as a result, are vulnerable to sudden outbursts of aggression, normally towards their handlers, which, in South Africa, has led to a number of injuries and fatalities to humans.

Spatially confined and controlled, Elephants lack the very foundation of elephant life. Holding elephants in captivity causes them enormous stress and constitutes cruelty. Elephants suffer when confined and confinement even in the best facilities constitutes extreme cruelty.

The bottom line is that captivity, and keeping elephant in unnatural conditions, is simply unsuitable for elephants .

WAPFSA acknowledges and strongly sympathises with the recent tragic loss of a human, and then an elephant life, at HERD a captive elephant facility in Hoedspruit in South Africa. The background to the incident is important, in 2002 a group of eleven Elephants from Zimbabwe, who had been removed from their families when they were very young and subjected to 'training' for use in the elephant back safari industry, were relocated to the Kapama Private Game Reserve/Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre (HESC), situated on 13 000 hectares in Limpopo, South Africa, and used in the elephant back safari business at Camp Jabulani, a lodge situated at Kapama.

Camp Jabulani stopped offering elephant back safaris in 2017, as mounting pressure grew about welfare concerns for elephants involved in this industry. Camp Jabulani rebranded itself shifting its focus to offer guests experiences with three bull elephants: Jabulani, Sebakwe or Somopane.

HERD (Hoedspruit Elephant Rehabilitation and Development) was established on the same reserve in 2019 where two orphaned female elephants were integrated into Camp Jabulani captive elephant 'herd'.

At the time of this incident, according to the HERD website, there were sixteen elephants at Camp Jabulani, the original eleven elephants and five additional elephants. The elephants, according to the website, spend most of their day walking in the Kapama Private Game Reserve under the supervision of the elephant handlers and they return to the HERD facility at night.

According to a statement released by HERD on the 13th September 2025, Israel Shambira, a senior elephant handler was killed by one of these 16 elephants – a 19 year old female named Limpopo. Mr Shambira accompanied the original eleven elephants from Zimbabwe to HESC. On the 22nd September HERD issued another statement saying that Limpopo had been "euthanised" saying that "*HERD resolved to move Limpopo along with six of her companions to a secure 35 hectare enclosure at the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre approximately*

ten kilometres away" and that "*On Friday the 19th September 2025 as the selected elephants started their walk from the HERD boma, within a few hundred metres, the elephants from both groups began vocalising, becoming very excitable. The elephants, who had left, quickly returned to the others. During the excitement unfortunately Limpopo showed hyper-aggression towards one of our senior carers and our senior operations manager…Limpopo was humanely euthanised."*

Many elephant handlers have been killed in South Africa and this is not the first time an elephant at Camp Jabulani has killed an elephant handler. Killing the elephants caught in captivity is not the solution. In South Africa the lives of both humans and elephants depend on meaningful change. The way forward must involve constructive dialogue, stronger policies, and renewed commitment to ensuring elephants live in the wild, where they can thrive safely and naturally.

The key is to rehabilitate and rewild these elephant victims, not punish them. WAPFSA remains deeply concerned that captive elephant facilities continue to exist in South Africa. Elephant welfare and well-being and the safety and security of the elephant handlers who are interacting with elephants must be prioritised. In terms of captive wildlife tourism in South Africa, WAPFSA strongly believes that tourists should be allowed to watch elephants in their natural environments but should not engage in unnatural activities such as touching or feeding or used as a backdrop for photoshoots.

WAPFSA calls on Honourable Minister George, to facilitate an independent and public review of the captive elephant industry in South Africa with the view of phasing captive elephant facilities that offer interactions with humans.

Signed on behalf of the following WAPFSA members:

Michele Pickover, Executive Director **EMS Foundation**
Megan Carr, Founder **Rhinos in Africa**
Ross Harvey, Director of Research and Programmes at **Good Governance Africa**
Cormac Cullinan, Founder **Wild Law Institute**
Chad Cupido, Executive Officer **Beauty Without Cruelty**
Vishwas Satgar, Founder and Chair **Co-Operative and Policy Alternative Centre**
Charles Simane, Communications **Climate Justice Charter Movement**
Wynter Worsthorne, Founder **Animal Talk Africa**
Stefania Falcon, Founder **Future for Wildlife**
Luana Pasanisi, Founder **Green Group Simonstown**
Guy Jennings, Consultant **Wild Africa Fund Southern Africa**
Linda Tucker, Founder and CEO **Global White Lion Protection Trust**
Vivien Law, Founder **Ancient Earth Farm**
Kirsten Youens, Chief Executive **AllRise Attorneys for Climate and Environmental Justice**
Francesca deGasparis, Executive Director **South African Faith Communities Environmental Institute**
Sairusha Govindsamy, Youth Activist Network **African Climate Alliance**
Smaragda Louw, Founder/ Director **Ban Animal Trading**
Stephen Munro, Director **Centre for Animal Rehabilitation and Education**

Samantha Dewhirst, Director **Centre for Animal Rehabilitation and Education**
Pete Oxford and Rene Bisch, Founders **Betty's Bay Baboon Action Group**
Cora Bailey, Founder **Community Led Animal Welfare**
Mphatheleni Makaulule, Director **Dzomo La Mupo**
Liezl Smith, Chairperson **Kogelberg Villages Environmental Trustees**
Jabu Myeni, Founder **Gifted for Good**
Les Mitchell, Director **Institute for Critical Animal Studies**

Janet Solomon, Founder **Ocean Not Oil**
Steve Smit, Co-Founder **Monkey Helpline**
Liz Cornwall and Catherine Nyquist, Co-Founders **Panthera Africa Big Cat Sanctuary**
Lex Abnett, Director **Southern African Fight for Rhinos**
Dave Du Toit, Founder **Vervet Monkey Foundation**