



The Director-General: Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
Attention: **Ms Asnath Hlungwani / Ms Mashudu Mahada**
Per Electronic Communication
conservationManagement@dffe.gov.za
ahlungwani@dffe.gov.za.
mmahada@dffe.gov.za

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WAPFSA SUBMISSION: South Africa's Draft National Leopard Conservation Strategy and Action Plan 2026

Introduction

The Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Mr David Maynier, notified members of the public of the publication of the draft National Leopard Conservation Strategy and Action Plan, 2026, for public comment, in terms of sections 99 and 100 of the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act, 2004 (Act No. 10 of 2004). The draft Strategy and Action Plan was published in Government Gazette No. 55299, Notice No. 7877, dated 04 September 2026.

The draft National Leopard Conservation Strategy and Action Plan, 2026 (draft Strategy and Action Plan) proposes a shared national vision that "leopards thrive in living landscapes, support cultural traditions and local livelihoods through inclusive, community-driven conservation." It seeks to offer direction that aligns with the aspirational vision of the White Paper on Conservation and Sustainable Use of South Africa's Biodiversity, 2023, and the values and hopes of South Africans concerning leopards and how leopards can benefit both society and the environment.

The draft Strategy and Action Plan envisions acknowledging leopards as a vital component of the nation's natural heritage, valued across cultures for their ecological, cultural and symbolic significance. By protecting leopard habitats and biodiversity, the Strategy and Action Plan could catalyse sustainable development and transformation within South Africa. The draft Strategy and Action Plan is also supported by goals and strategic activities based on the species' (a) ecological role, (b) social and cultural values, and (c) livelihoods and impacts of leopards.



Counting Shadows: South Africa's New Plan Confronts a Glaring Lack of Leopard Data

According to the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) Draft National Leopard Conservation Strategy published in September 2026, the existing data on leopard population is highly speculative, with widely differing published historical estimates ranging from 2 185 to 23 400 leopards.^{1,2}

A published estimation of a range spanning from 2 185 to 23 400 leopards, confirms the extreme difficulty of accurately determining the numbers of elusive, nocturnal, and wide-ranging predators. Leopards are master adaptors and exceptionally stealthy. Unlike elephants or lions, which can often be counted via aerial surveys or open-savannah sightings, leopards live in dense bush, mountains, and forests. They avoid human contact, making direct counting very difficult.

Many of the higher historical estimates such as the upper bound of 23,400 were based on population models or habitat availability rather than physical counts. The upper-end estimate of 23 400 dates back to a flawed 1988 mathematical model (Martin & de Meulenaer) that linked leopard density. Scientists would analyse large-scale maps to quantify the extent of suitable habitat available to leopards, multiply it by a theoretical leopard density, and produce a number. These models often failed to account for localized threats like poaching, farmers protecting livestock, or prey depletion.³

Researchers would study a small, well-protected area such as the Kruger National Park where leopard density is naturally very high. If they extrapolated that dense number across the entire geography of South Africa, it resulted in a massive overestimation. Historically, counts relied on track counts spoor or trophy hunting diaries. Modern estimates rely on and spatially explicit capture-recapture (SECR) models.⁴ As technology has advanced, biologists have realized that older numbers were often highly inflated, which is why newer data often skews lower and conservative.

South Africa cannot safely manage a the leopard species based on guesswork, because the margins of error are so wide, conservationists must adopt the precautionary principle. If the true number is closer to 2,000, over-allocating hunting permits or ignoring habitat loss could push the species to local extinction.

¹<https://mq.co.za/the-green-guardian/2026-09-21-sa-s-leopard-population-remains-uncertain-as-new-strategy-weighs-conservation-and-hunting/>

²https://www.dffe.gov.za/sites/default/files/legislations/nemba_draftleopardconservationstrategy_actionplan_g55299gon7877.pdf

³<https://www.conservationaction.co.za/leopard-2019-leopard-trophy-hunting-quota-wildlife-animal-protection-forum-submission/>

⁴<https://nsojournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1600-0706.2012.20440.x>



The official framework of DFFE Draft Leopard Conservation Strategy (2026), explicitly acknowledges that the fundamental flaw is that the exact leopard population size and trends remain uncertain, complicating sustainable wildlife management. This is not a new phenomenon or problem.

Five years ago, in a Parliamentary Reply (Question No. 2318) Barbara Creecy, Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, noted in her 2021 response that none of the existing figures for leopards were based on comprehensive, regional-scale counts, creating massively wide confidence intervals. The details are recorded in the [Parliamentary Question Repository](#).

“Leopards are generally considered uncommon in South Africa, however, estimates of the size of the national population vary widely from 2 185 to 23 400 leopards (Friedmann & Traylor-Holzer, 2005; Martin & De Meulenaer, 1988; Swanepoel et al., 2014b). None of these estimates are based on rigorous population counts at regional scales and their confidence intervals are so wide, indicating the need for more information (for example, 2 813 to 11 632 leopards estimated by Swanepoel et al., 2014b).

- ii) Leopards are very difficult to survey accurately, especially in the dense bush found in the Kruger National Park (KNP). A mark-recapture survey using camera traps gave an estimate of between 1 630 and 2 860 leopards in the KNP in 2011. SANParks is confident that there has not been much fluctuation in respect of leopard numbers in the KNP year on year since the survey was conducted.
- a) Given the concerns around the current state of conservation of leopards, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) is of the view that all options for the conservation and sustainable use of leopards should be explored. The use of artificial skin is an option that was introduced by NGOs in an effort to reduce the poaching of leopards for their skin. To date, it has not yet been promoted by the DFFE and may be considered by the Leopard Forum (a forum to coordinate the work of leopard management from various role players towards the development of the Leopard Biodiversity Management Plan) if it is deemed a viable option for the promotion of the conservation and sustainable use of leopards. The DFFE, however, continues to educate and raise awareness throughout the country on the threats to the survival of the species and the impact of the illegal and unsustainable use of leopards, including the unsustainable harvesting of skin and other derivatives from leopards. More importantly, the DFFE is engaging with rural and urban communities on legal ways to source skins to ensure compliance with the legislation.

SANParks has engaged with the Panthera Foundation on sourcing artificial leopard skins to be used by traditional leaders for ceremonial purposes. The Panthera Foundation has committed to providing SANParks with 20 artificial leopard skins. Upon receipt of these skins, SANParks will engage with the traditional leaders to map a way forward.”



The [South African National Biodiversity Institute \(SANBI\)](#) officially records the leopard species (*Panthera pardus*) population as Vulnerable. SANBI's most systematic mathematical evaluation estimates the leopard population in South Africa to be between 2 813 and 11 632 leopards equating to roughly 1 688 – 6 979 mature individuals.⁵

Leopards are notoriously elusive, solitary, and nocturnal. Furthermore, they have been driven out of 67% of their historical range in South Africa, meaning most suitable habitats now exist outside formally protected parks on private land, where systematic monitoring is harder.

Balancing Living Landscapes with Missing Data

Leopards face habitat loss and fragmentation, human-wildlife conflict, retaliatory and illegal killing, illegal trade, declining prey and uneven conservation capacity with their most suitable habitat now lying outside formally protected areas.

DFFE's Draft National Leopard Action Plan and conservation strategy sets out an ambitious vision for leopards to thrive across "living landscapes" while supporting cultural traditions and local livelihoods but acknowledges a fundamental problem at the heart of managing the iconic species, there is no rigorous estimate of how many leopards remain in the South Africa.

The document also raises questions about how South Africa determines what constitutes sustainable use of a species whose population size and trends remain uncertain. According to the strategy, limited standardised, long-term population monitoring "hinders evidence-based decision-making and undermines the ability to set sustainable hunting quotas or assess conservation outcomes".

The integration of living landscapes and leopard conservation is inherently incompatible with sustainable use and trophy hunting models. Large carnivores like leopards possess complex social structures and territorial behaviours that are easily disrupted by the targeted removal of individuals, particularly prime males. When a dominant leopard is killed for sport, it triggers a cascade of territorial instability, leading to increased infighting, territory battles, and high rates of infanticide as new males take over. Furthermore, treating wildlife as a harvestable commodity undermines the core philosophy of living landscapes, which promotes the peaceful coexistence of humans and predators sharing a contiguous ecosystem. By prioritizing short-term economic gains from hunting over long-term ecological balance, sustainable-use frameworks often exacerbate human-wildlife conflict rather than resolving it, proving that true leopard conservation requires strict protection and habitat connectivity rather than managed exploitation

⁵ <https://speciesstatus.sanbi.org/assessment/last-assessment/2172/>

⁶ <https://wildafrica.org/leopards-are-already-extinct-in-67-of-south-africa-and-have-lost-¾-of-their-natural-habitat-globally/>



Hunting in the Dark: The Contradiction of South Africa's 2026–2027 Leopard Quotas

Despite the pronounced uncertainty of leopard population data, on August 31, 2026, South Africa's Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, David Maynier, officially published the final CITES export hunting quotas for 2026 and 2027 in the Government Gazette. Following a public consultation process that originally commenced with a draft proposal in February 2026, the [Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment \(DFFE\)](#) confirmed a sustainable allocation of 11 leopard hunting trophies for the 2026 calendar year, which will slightly decrease to 10 leopard hunting trophies for 2027. These strictly regulated hunting allowances apply exclusively to adult male leopards aged seven years or older within specifically designated zones.⁷

The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment informed the *Mail & Guardian* that the quotas, allocated under the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act, had been informed by the best available scientific information and recommendations from the Scientific Authority of South Africa.⁸

"The quotas serve to support lawful and responsible conservation management by the private sector," it said. "The Cites export quotas regulate the maximum number of hunting trophies that may be exported from South Africa and do not automatically authorise hunting of these species. Any hunting activity remains subject to all applicable national and provincial permit requirements and compliance measures."

A highly significant July 2026 study published in the *Journal of Applied Ecology*. Conducted by researchers from Nottingham Trent University and Nelson Mandela University, the paper represents an extensive effort to establish quantitative conservation targets for leopards across sub-Saharan Africa.⁹

"Large carnivores continue to decline across Africa, yet effective conservation planning for the leopard (*Panthera pardus*) is constrained by the lack of empirical, range-wide population data needed to support robust assessments and evidence-based management. Leopards have disappeared from approximately 41% of their historical African range, underscoring the need for continent-scale evaluation of their remaining population and recovery potential."¹⁰

⁷ https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202609/55285gon7867.pdf

⁸ <https://mg.co.za/the-green-guardian/2026-09-21-sa-s-leopard-population-remains-uncertain-as-new-strategy-weighs-conservation-and-hunting/>

⁹ <https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1365-2664.70447>

¹⁰ <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/408484577> Quantitative targets for leopard conservation in sub-Saharan Africa



The study also raises serious concerns regarding trophy hunting, with currently international leopard hunting quotas exceeding what is considered sustainable in more than half of the countries assessed, indicating how hunting could be contributing to leopards' decline.¹¹

“We compiled published leopard density estimates, developed a predictive model for sub-Saharan Africa and integrated predicted density with an independent habitat suitability model to estimate population size under current and historical conditions. Leopard density was negatively associated with livestock, sheep and goats, density, proximity to human settlements and the proportion of agricultural and forest land cover, while positively associated with the species richness of wild bovids and suds.

The integrated model predicted a contemporary leopard population of approximately 44,800–142,600 individuals across sub-Saharan Africa, substantially lower than previous estimates, with only 2800–8700 adult males occurring in non-protected areas of countries where trophy hunting is permitted. These findings have direct management implications.

Current CITES leopard hunting quotas exceed the recommended offtake threshold of 10% of the adult male population in more than half of the assessed trophy-hunting countries, indicating that quota revision is urgently needed in several jurisdictions. In addition, the species' potential population under present ecological conditions within its historical range is estimated at 55,200–175,600 individuals. These estimates provide spatially explicit recovery targets to guide the prioritisation of habitat protection, prey restoration and population recovery efforts. “

The study estimated South Africa's adult male leopard population at about 1 084, with a 95% confidence interval of 639 to 1 773. The study does not conclude that South Africa's current quota of 10 or 11 animals is unsustainable. However, the estimate highlights uncertainty around the adult male population, the demographic group most relevant to trophy hunting, which generally targets older males.

Of particular relevance to trophy hunting, the researchers estimated that only 2 800 to 8 700 adult male leopards live outside protected areas in countries where trophy hunting is permitted. The researchers use 10% of the adult male population as a recommended maximum offtake threshold and found that current Cites hunting quotas exceed that threshold in more than half of the trophy-hunting countries assessed.

¹¹ <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/about-us/news/news-articles/2026/06/raft-of-targeted-conservation-efforts-may-help-boost-leopard-numbers-in-sub-saharan-africa,-study-suggests#:~:text=Raft of targeted conservation efforts,analysed suitable habitat and conditions.>



Bridges and Boundaries: Reconciling Cultural and Ecological Priorities

Across Southern Africa, the leopard holds an unparalleled position in the social hierarchy. In Zulu and Lozi traditions, the leopard skin (*amambatha*) is deeply tied to royalty. Historically, kings and traditional leaders (*izinduna*) wore leopard pelts to project power, courage, and divine legitimacy.¹² For religious groups like the Shembe Church (Nazareth Baptist Church) and traditional healers (*sangomas*), wearing the skins during sacred dances is a requirement for channelling ancestral wisdom and performing protective rituals.

South Africa's published Draft National Leopard Conservation Strategy and Action Plan 2026 follows 31 stakeholder workshops held across all nine provinces between August and December 2024, involving 1 980 participants, including traditional leaders, academics, conservation and welfare organisations, farmers, reserve managers, hunters, tourism operators and government authorities.

The consultations exposed competing views on how leopards should be managed. Traditional and cultural stakeholders highlighted the significance of leopard skins and other body parts for spiritual, cultural and medicinal purposes.

A study titled *"Longitudinal assessment of illegal leopard skin use in ceremonial regalia and acceptance of faux alternatives among followers of the Shembe Church, South Africa"* evaluated the impact of [Panthera's](#) "Furs for Life" (FFL) intervention program. The project distributes high-quality synthetic leopard fur capes (*amambatha*) to reduce the poaching of leopards for culture-religious regalia.¹³

The study included analysing data from 8,600 in-person questionnaires and 2,300 telephone follow-ups, the study revealed several key insights regarding demand, behavioural change, and socioeconomic drivers.

Despite having protected status, poaching for the illegal trade and traditional use remains a primary threat to leopards (*Panthera pardus*) across southern Africa.

¹² <https://www.ulwaziprogramme.org/the-importance-of-the-leopard/>

¹³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344588214_Longitudinal_assessment_of_illegal_leopard_skin_use_in_ceremonial_regalia_and_acceptance_of_faux_alternatives_among_followers_of_the_Shembe_Church_South_Africa



Addressing this threat is challenging, not only because it is difficult to uncover and monitor illicit behaviour, but because law enforcement and alternative intervention strategies need to account for cultural and political sensitivities to prove effective and sustainable.

With up to 4 million followers in southern Africa, the recently-established Nazareth Baptist "Shembe" Church represents the principal culture-religious use of illegal leopard skins in the world.

This longitudinal study used in-person questionnaires ($n = 8,600$) and telephone follow-ups ($n = 2,300$) with Shembe followers to explore socioeconomic and experiential factors related to the desirability and possession of illegal leopard skins before and after receiving a faux alternative through the Furs for Life (FFL) intervention program. Proportional possession of authentic skins was relatively low among followers who received faux skins (21%), with declines of 7 and 13% in subsequent authentic skin acquisition and desirability, respectively. Logistic regression models revealed that authentic skin possession, both before and after receiving a faux skin, was primarily related to employment status.¹⁴

Desire for authentic skins increased with recipient age, but decreased with improved knowledge of leopard population status since receiving the faux skin. Followers who were dissatisfied with faux skins were likely to express a continued desire for authentic skins. Most followers (95%) were, however, satisfied with the faux alternative, having retained and worn it at gatherings, with little noticeable damage or perceived societal judgment. These results support the FFL intervention as a means of protecting leopards: Although authentic skins were still acquired, demand decreased significantly over 3 years with shifts in perception favouring faux leopard skin alternatives.^{15, 16}

Leopards hold profound symbolic and therapeutic value in South African traditional medicine (known as *muthi*), where healers utilize specific body parts to channel the animal's traits. In African traditional medicine, the leopard (*Panthera pardus*) represents absolute authority, resilience, and spiritual power. Because traditional healing operates on the principle of association, possessing a piece of this apex predator is believed to transfer its physical and spiritual strengths to the recipient.¹⁷

¹⁴<https://panthera.org/blog-post/furs-life-7-million-strong>

¹⁵<https://www.wildlifeact.com/blog/panthera-furs-for-life-faux-furs>

¹⁶<https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/csp2.289>

¹⁷<https://sahistory.org.za/article/indigenous-medicine-and-traditional-healing>



The ongoing debate over allowing trophy hunting of leopards while restricting local cultural use centres on economic utility versus population preservation. Trophy hunting is often legally permitted under strict quotas because it supposedly generates substantial international revenue, which conservation authorities argue can be directly reinvested into habitat protection, anti-poaching units, and community incentives to tolerate predators.

In contrast, local cultural uses, such as harvesting leopard skins for traditional regalia often operate outside regulated markets, making it much harder to monitor, enforce quotas, or prevent illegal trade networks. While this creates a stark ethical and social paradox where wealthy foreigners are granted access that locals are denied, wildlife managers view it as a pragmatic, financial balancing act to ensure the long-term survival of a threatened species.

Where the Spots Meet the Soil

Collaborating directly with the organisations at the coal face of leopard conservation, such as local trackers, field researchers, and rural farmers is vital because they possess real-time, contextual insight that data from a distance cannot capture. Wildlife conservation is a deeply social process as much as a scientific one, long-term success hinges on understanding the human dimensions of human-wildlife conflict.

Communities living alongside these apex predators offer unparalleled knowledge on shifting leopard territories, nocturnal movement patterns, and local livestock vulnerabilities. Partnering with organizations on the ground, such as the Endanger Wildlife Trust or the [Cape Leopard Trust](#) or the Landmark Foundation allows conservationists to co-create practical mitigation strategies. By centering the perspectives of those who share their immediate landscape with large carnivores, initiatives can move past rigid enforcement toward genuine, sustainable human-wildlife coexistence.

The [Endangered Wildlife Trust \(EWT\)](#) studies and protects leopards in South Africa. While their main flagship carnivore projects focus primarily on African Wild Dogs, Cheetahs, and Lions, they consistently include leopards in their regional research initiatives, human-wildlife conflict mitigation, and collaborative partnerships.¹⁸

¹⁸<https://ewt.org/drylands-conservation-programme/>



The [Endangered Wildlife Trust \(EWT\)](#) addresses leopard conservation through several targeted efforts. The "Tale of Two Leopards" Project: In the Overberg region, the EWT partnered with the [Cape Leopard Trust \(CLT\)](#) on a collaborative project studying the shared coastal habitats of the Cape leopard and the Western leopard toad. The EWT utilizes camera trap networks in areas like the Anysberg to monitor highly isolated, elusive Cape leopard populations and understand their territory sizes and localized threats.¹⁹

Through initiatives like the Livestock Guardian Dog Project, the EWT actively educates farmers and provides non-lethal solutions to protect livestock, reducing the retaliatory trapping, snaring, or poisoning of free-roaming leopards. The EWT's Carnivore Conservation Programme collaborates with local provincial authorities to safely capture, microchip, and relocate problem leopards that have become dangerously habituated to human activity such as on mining properties.²⁰

In an interview with *Mail & Guardian* Derek van der Merwe, manager of the Carnivore Conservation Unit at the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) said quota decisions should be based on current, spatially explicit scientific evidence. "I therefore believe greater transparency is needed around the data, population assessments and methodology used to determine the current quotas and translate national information into hunting-zone allocations," he said.²¹

The EWT supports precautionary measures already attached to the quota system, including the allocation of one leopard per designated hunting zone and the requirement that hunted males be seven years or older. Van der Merwe said the strategy appropriately identified the major threats to leopards and the need for stronger long-term monitoring, but that implementation and resourcing would be critical. "However, all forms of use must ultimately be underpinned by demonstrable conservation outcomes, effective monitoring and adaptive management," he said.

¹⁹<https://capeleopard.org.za/updates/camera-trapping-for-overberg-leopards-in-full-swing>

²⁰<https://ewt.org/livestock-guardian-dog-project-south-africa/>

²¹<https://mg.co.za/the-green-guardian/2026-09-21-sa-s-leopard-population-remains-uncertain-as-new-strategy-weighs-conservation-and-hunting/>



Van der Merwe said that while the strategy identifies the major threats facing leopards and appropriately recognises the need for stronger, long-term and standardised population monitoring “implementation and resourcing of this monitoring will be critical, particularly given the acknowledged uncertainty around leopard population size and trends in parts of the country”.

Dr Bool Smuts is a prominent South African ecologist, wildlife conservationist, and researcher. He is best known as the founder and general manager of the Landmark Foundation, a conservation NGO that specialises in human-wildlife conflict and the protection of leopards South Africa's last free-roaming apex predator. He also serves as a research affiliate at the University of the Western Cape. Bool Smuts, general manager of the Landmark Foundation, an NGO dedicated to leopard conservation and broader environmental protection, in an interview with *Mail & Guardian* said the strategy did not go far enough in addressing weaknesses in monitoring, enforcement and transparency.²²

“It is largely a consolidation and operationalisation of existing policy rather than a meaningful scientific or governance shift,” Smuts said. A “defensible quota” would require recent, spatially explicit population estimates covering protected and non-protected land, age and sex-structured demographic modelling, and data on legal trophy hunting, illegal killing, retaliatory mortality and other sources of mortality.²³

He argues, too, that the draft strategy needs to demonstrate more clearly how economic benefits from wildlife use would reach communities living with leopards, rather than relying on general commitments to benefit-sharing.

Regarding South Africa's Draft National Leopard Conservation Strategy and Action Plan, the global wild cat conservation organization [Panthera](https://panthera.org/) emphasizes that effective leopard management requires integrated, landscape-level collaboration across public, private, and communal boundaries. They stress that core conservation needs such as habitat protection, prey conservation, conflict reduction, anti-poaching, and improved data monitoring, must be treated as interconnected priorities rather than isolated projects.²⁴

²² <https://independent.academia.edu/BoolSmuts>

²³ <https://mg.co.za/the-green-guardian/2026-09-21-sa-s-leopard-population-remains-uncertain-as-new-strategy-weighs-conservation-and-hunting/>

²⁴ <https://panthera.org/panthera-south-africa>



Crucially, [Panthera](#) advocates for demand-reduction strategies that respect local culture, pointing to their own Furs for Life initiative which has distributed over 18,500 synthetic leopard fur capes (*amambatha*) to traditional communities, as a proven template for mitigating ceremonial hunting pressures while supporting the national plan's socio-cultural goals.²⁵

Panthera served on the core revision team and contributed to consultations for the [National Leopard Conservation Strategy and Action Plan](#) alongside the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), and SANParks. Panthera has partnered with state and provincial conservation bodies such as Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and SANBI since 2013 on long-term camera trap surveys and monitoring projects to track leopard numbers and densities. Through initiatives like the Furs for Life project, Panthera helped reduce the demand for real leopard skins in traditional ceremonial attire by introducing faux fur alternatives, supporting broader state conservation and cultural goals.²⁶

Dr. Gareth Mann, the Director of [Panthera's Leopard Program](#), advocates for a multi-layered action plan to stabilize and grow global leopard populations. He emphasizes bridging the gap between rigorous scientific field data and community-driven, socio-economic conservation efforts.²⁷

Predators and Pastures

WAPFSA notes that the [National Leopard Conservation Strategy and Action Plan](#) identifies trophy hunting as only one source of leopard mortality. Retaliatory killings, poaching, snaring, illegal trade, animals removed as damage-causing animals, habitat loss and fragmentation and declining prey all contribute to pressure on the leopard species.

In South Africa, the complex relationship between livestock farmers and leopards represents a critical frontline for wildlife conservation and agricultural sustainability.

²⁵ <https://panthera.org/furs-for-life>

²⁶ <https://www.wildlifeact.com/blog/the-secret-lives-of-leopards-how-camera-trap-monitoring-is-transforming-leopard-conservation-in-south-africa>

²⁷ <https://panthera.org/gareth-mann>



As human development and farming expand into natural habitats, free-roaming leopards, particularly the smaller, wide-ranging Cape leopards in the mountainous regions of the Western Cape frequently come into contact with agricultural lands.

While leopards naturally prefer wild prey like dassies and small antelope, vulnerable livestock such as sheep, calves, and horses present easy targets.

This predation creates substantial financial and psychological distress for farmers, sometimes leading to illegal retaliatory killings using traps, snares, or shooting. However, the historic return of leopards to regions such as the West Coast highlights a modern shift toward coexistence. Prominent conservation groups, such as the [Cape Leopard Trust \(CLT\)](#), are actively partnering with agricultural communities to implement non-lethal management strategies. By promoting holistic livestock husbandry, constructing secure enclosures, maintaining natural prey bases, and establishing compensation schemes, these initiatives aim to safeguard the livelihoods of farmers while preserving South Africa's apex predators.²⁸

In the Heidelberg district of the Western Cape, South Africa, a controversial and highly publicized wildlife crime sparked widespread outrage when a local farmer caught a young, 13 kilogram male leopard using two adjacent gin traps. The illegal devices snapped shut with enough force to fracture both a front and hind leg of the protected apex predator.²⁹

Although conservation authorities from [CapeNature](#) were called to the scene, the six-month-old cub unfortunately died during the rescue attempt. Despite national laws dictating penalties of up to R10 million for killing a protected species without a permit, the farmer was permitted to pay a mere R1,000 admission-of-guilt fine. Conservation groups heavily criticized the outcome, noting that the nominal fine, which costs less than filling up a farm vehicle's fuel tank, highlighted a severe gap in the enforcement and prosecution of biodiversity and anti-cruelty laws.³⁰

²⁸ <https://capeleopard.org.za/>

²⁹ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2026-05-20-sustainable-use-of-wildlife-is-a-conditional-promise-that-sa-has-not-reached-/>

³⁰ <https://medium.com/@boolsmuts/the-npas-war-on-leopards-and-the-wildlife-laws-248189340916>



Well documented [leopard-related prosecutorial failure s](#) in the Western and Northern Cape between 2024 and 2026 revealed a deeply troubling enforcement record. Across seven incidents involving the trapping, unlawful capture or killing of protected leopards, there was one single R1,000 admission-of-guilt fine, multiple failures by the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) to prosecute and no meaningful custodial sentence, and one matter, delayed for years through procedural failures, may yet end in a constitutionally permanent acquittal.

WAPFSA RECOMMENDATIONS

South Africa's constitutional guarantee to protect the environment requires balancing ecological integrity with human development, but equating "sustainable use" with trophy hunting undermines the broader mandate of intergenerational equity and biodiversity protection.

Legal analysts and conservation critics point out that treating wild animals merely as commercial commodities for selective, high-paying sport sidelines holistic ecological stewardship and prioritizes short-term economic gains for private landowners over systemic animal welfare and biodiversity health.

Furthermore, South Africa's higher courts such as in landmark rulings highlighted by the [Constitutional Court](#) have increasingly emphasized that the constitutional right to an ecologically sustainable environment cannot justify practices causing severe animal suffering or environmental degradation. Relying on trophy hunting as a core pillar of conservation distorts the true meaning of sustainability, which should instead foster non-consumptive ecotourism, ethical habitat preservation, and genuine community-based resource management that safeguards ecosystems for future generations.

The Draft [National Leopard Conservation Strategy and Action Plan 2026](#) has been published for [public comment](#). The draft Strategy and Action Plan envisions acknowledging leopards as a vital component of the nation's natural heritage, valued across cultures for their ecological, cultural and symbolic significance.

The draft Strategy and Action Plan is supported by goals and strategic activities based on the species' (a) ecological role, (b) social and cultural values, and (c) livelihoods and impacts of leopards.



Recommendations:

1. The Legal and Scientific Deficit

We must highlight a core, ongoing crisis in South African biodiversity management. South Africa has not published a Non-Detriment Finding (NDF) for leopards since May 2015, yet the government continues to allocate and debate trophy hunting export quotas. This systemic gap places the country's wildlife management in a complex legal and ethical deadlock.

The last formalized leopard NDF, gazetted in September 2015, explicitly concluded that international trade and trophy hunting posed a high risk to the survival of leopards in South Africa. This was driven by a lack of reliable population data, illegal killings, and poor harvest management.

Under CITES regulations and South Africa's National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act, an export quota for an Appendix I species *cannot* legally be enforced without a current, scientifically backed NDF proving the trade isn't detrimental. Despite this, the South African National Biodiversity Institute ([SANBI](#)) has not gazetted a new, finalized leopard NDF to justify recent quotas.

2. Re-evaluate and Reduce Trophy Hunting Quotas

A comprehensive 2026 continent-scale assessment reveals that current CITES hunting quotas exceed sustainable limits in more than half of the trophy-hunting countries evaluated.

Leopard population models dictate that the maximum safe offtake threshold is strictly 10% of the adult male population.

South Africa should instantly audit and reduce hunting quotas to match empirical population data, capping annual harvests well below the 10% adult male threshold to prevent localized population collapses.

3. Prioritize Corridor Connectivity & Habitat Restoration

Leopards have vanished from roughly 41% of their historical African range. Predictive models show that leopard density drops significantly near high-density human settlements, agricultural zones, and dense livestock farming, specifically sheep and goats.



Conversely, leopard populations thrive where there is a high species richness of wild bovids and suids. Suids are stout, hoofed mammals with thick skin and prominent tusks. African species commonly hunted by large predators including the bushpig (*Potamochoerus larvatus*) and the common warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus*).

We need to shift focus from isolated protected areas to landscape-level habitat restoration and designated movement corridors to reconnect fragmented forest and savanna patches. Proactively restore populations of wild prey, ungulates, inside and outside protected boundaries to reduce the likelihood of leopards targeting domestic livestock.

4. Establish Centralised, Standardised Monitoring Databases

National leopard trend lines are highly volatile and mask dangerous regional declines. For example, while some national datasets show an average annual increase of 2.6%, regional data shows areas such as KwaZulu-Natal are actively losing leopards at a rate of 3% per year, while data for the Eastern Cape remains entirely scarce.

South Africa needs to fund and scale continuous, large-scale camera-trap surveys spanning 1500–3500 km². Consolidate this data into a centralised national population database, mirroring frameworks like the Cape Leopard Trust's Leopard Data Portal in order to eliminate blind spots and enable adaptive, real-time management.

5. Revise Human-Wildlife Conflict and Translocation Protocols

Long-term tracking shows leopards possess incredible homing instincts. When a "problem animal" is trapped and translocated away from its home range, it routinely attempts to navigate back, steering it directly through dense human/agricultural landscapes. This increases the frequency and severity of human-leopard conflict rather than reducing it.

These are some practical considerations:

- (a) Treat capture and translocation as an absolute last resort.
- (b) If an animal must be captured and released, it should remain within its immediate home range.
- (c) Invest heavily in non-lethal community-driven deterrence, compensating farmers for livestock protection, and addressing the cultural use of leopard skins through sustainable alternatives.



THE WILDLIFE ANIMAL PROTECTION FORUM OF SOUTH AFRICA (WAPFSA)

The [Wildlife Animal Protection Forum South Africa](#) (WAPFSA) is a collaborative network of around 30 South African non-governmental organizations established in 2017 to protect wild animals and their natural environments. WAPFSA unites experts from the scientific, legal, conservation, animal welfare, and public advocacy sectors to engage with the government through research, advocacy, and litigation. The forum primarily lobbies against the commercial exploitation, captive breeding, trading, and trophy hunting of wildlife while promoting compassionate conservation and humane coexistence between humans and animals.

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Michele Pickover Executive Director **EMS Foundation**
Megan Carr Founder **Rhinos in Africa**
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Vivien Law Founder **Ancient Earth Farm**
Kirsten Youens Chief Executive **AllRise Attorneys for Climate and Environmental Justice**
Francesca deGasparis Exec. Director **South African Faith Communities Environmental Institute**
Sairusha Govindsamy Youth Activist Network **African Climate Alliance**
Smaragda Louw Founder Director **Ban Animal Trading**
Stephen Munro and Samantha Dewhirst, Directors **Centre for Animal Rehabilitation and Education**
Pete Oxford and Rene Bishch 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 **Oceans Not Oil**



Carol Booth 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**

Signed

Megan Carr
WAPFSA Administrator
email: administrator@wapfsa.org
WhatsApp: +27832511978
website: <http://wapfsa.org/>