Via electronic delivery

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**22 March 2024**

**EXPERT OPINION OF THE SANPARKS PURSUIT OF A SCIENTIFIC-BASED STRATEGY FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF THE KNYSNA FOREST ELEPHANT**

The Pro Elephant Network (PREN) consists of a significant global community of diverse individuals and organisations. The PREN network boasts a wealth of expertise, related to wild and captive African and Asian Elephants, including but not limited to the fields of science, health, conservation, welfare and well-being, economics, community leadership, indigenous knowledge, social justice and the law, these experts have enjoyed a successful collaborative function since 2019.

## Introduction

The Knysna elephant(s), *Loxodonta africana*, represent the most southerly group of savanna elephants in Africa; they are remnant of larger populations which occupied this region of South Africa in the past. Due to the influx of humans over the last century, the range of these elephants was largely confined to the approximately 200 $km^2$ forest area around Knysna. The decline of this population of elephants to a single adult female presents a major challenge to the national conservation agency, South African National Parks (SANParks).

On the 7th of March 2024, SANParks issued a public statement confirming their intention to pursue an evidence-based management approach for the female elephant, located in the Knysna forest. More specifically, the Knysna forest is an area located in the Garden Route District Municipality in the Western Cape province of South Africa which falls under the management of SANParks.

According to the content of the media statement, SANParks has embarked on a sociological and ecological assessment that will guide their decision-making process. A targeted survey confirmed that, while the majority of respondents were in favour of the introduction of more elephants to the Garden

Route elephant range, they were cognisant of the fact that it would be a complicated process requiring expertise.

The reason for the statement issued by SANParks on the 7th of March 2024 is that a filmmaker who tracked, photographed and published photographs of an elusive female elephant in Knysna forest for twelve weeks in 2023 is trying to convince SANParks that a herd of elephants should be introduced to the Knysna forest to provide company for the lone female and to restore the ecosystem in the Knysna forest.

Since his brief single encounter with the elephant, he has been championing the introduction of an imported herd of elephants to the forest. He has formed an action group called *Herd Instinct*. The group, described on their Facebook page, as free-spirited environmentalists who believe that the lone female elephant desperately needs company. On the 14th of March 2024, the group organised a meeting in Knysna to galvanise support.

SANParks has captured the female elephant on camera every two to three weeks and they have, as a result, accumulated over 15000 photographs and high-quality videos of her, using strategically placed camera traps. Through the measurement of stress hormones in her dung it has been confirmed that, in areas where there is intense human activity or when she is being tracked, she becomes stressed.

## Background

Historically, elephants occurred widely along the Southern Cape region using a variety of habitats until their population numbers were decimated by ivory hunters. Unfortunately, the Knysna elephants, the only remaining free-ranging elephants in South Africa, have failed to flourish in that location even after official protection was afforded to them in 1908.

According to the study entitled *The Decline of the Knysna Elephants – Pattern and Hypothesis* it is estimated that of the 3000 elephants that roamed the Cape Floristic Region in pre-colonial times, it is likely that about 1000 elephants occupied the Outeniqua-Tsitsikamma area. Between 1856 and 1886 Knysna experienced a marked influx of humans and a boom in development which increased human-elephant conflict at a further detrimental cost to the elephant population.

During the late 1800s, an estimated 400 to 500 elephants lived in the area but by 1900 only 30 to 50 individuals were left. The aforementioned study highlights the knowledge and management challenges which exist for small, threatened populations of elephants where the long-term demographic data are sparse. The study also provides the first, unbiased evaluation of multiple drivers that may have caused the decline of the Knysna elephants.

The Knysna forest elephants have been the subject of mystery and conjecture for years. Gareth Patterson an award-winning environmentalist, wildlife expert, author and public speaker, published a book called *Beyond Secret Elephants* which highlights his extensive experiences based on the seven years that he spent examining the Knysna forest on foot.

In 2007 and 2009 his physical research samples were examined by Professor Lori Eggert, the Director of Graduate Studies in the Division of Biological Sciences at the University of Missouri, who has developed a method of genetic censusing specifically for the study of African and Asian elephant populations. According to Professor Lori Eggert, the Knysna forests contain more than one elephant. The results of this study, *The Knysna Elephants a Population Study Conducted Using Faecal DNA* were published in 2007.

In contradiction to Patterson and Eggert's published findings, were the results of a study that was conducted in 2016 and 2017 led by SANParks scientist Lizette Moolman using 80 cameras deployed at nearly 40 locations over the entire range. The cameras were all active for 15 months and during this time the same female elephant was identified in 140 capture events, always by herself. No other elephants were photographically captured. The conclusion of the study titled, *And Then There Was One: A Camera Trap Survey of the Declining Population of African Elephants in Knysna* was that it must be recognised that the Knysna population is functionally extinct. Future management must reflect either supplementation and or the addressing the welfare issues regarding the one remaining elephant.

## A Previous Attempt to Reintroduce Elephants to the Knysna Forest Area

In 1999 a study was published entitled *Habitat Quality and the Decline of an African Elephant Population - Implications for Conservation* after three subadult female elephants aged 7 – 9 years were translocated from the Kruger National Park to Diepwalle State Forest in Knysna in 1994. Unfortunately one of the elephants died on release. During the first five months after the release from the boma, situated within the forest, their movements were monitored by radiotracking. Thereafter their positions were periodically monitored by forest guard patrols. Habitat preferences were quantified through the estimated time spent in each of the forest and fynbos habitats. It was also recorded whether the translocated elephants were alone or in the company of the Knysna elephant. This monitoring programme spanned a period of two years and eight months, and according to the study, it involved 182 locations.

The study revealed that the Kruger National Park elephants preferred the more open habitat. The results of the faecal samples taken from the relocated elephants and compared with elephant faecal samples from the Addo National Park are also discussed and published in the study.

The study suggested that the reason for the introduced elephants ultimately roaming separately from the Knysna elephant in a more open habitat was that they were in search of a diet which was more appropriate to their natural nutritional needs. They sought out a corresponding diet as indicated by the findings of the study.

Antoni V Milewski from the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town described in detail which plants the elephants preferred to forage on. This information was recorded after he met with Wilfred Oraai the Forest Guard who had monitored the Knysna elephants from 1990 – 2000 and who also studied the KNP introduced elephants continually during their stay.

It was suggested that the decline of the Knysna elephants could be attributed to the low nutrient/carbon ratios in the diet available to them, in their confined to a predominantly forest environment due to residential and agricultural development in the area. The low nutrient-carbon ratios were thought to result in low metabolic turnover rates and thus reproductive rates that are too low to offset mortalities.

Of additional importance, in contrast to the translocated elephants, which were conditioned to human contact during an extended period of captivity prior to release, the Knysna elephant was very sensitive to contact situations with humans.

The two remaining KNP elephants were relocated to the Shamwari Game Reserve after a five-year period in 1999.

## Concern About the Proposed Introduction of Elephants to the Knysna Forest

The studies conducted over the years show that the unsuitable habitat for elephant could have significantly contributed to the population demise of the Knysna forest-dwelling elephants. Therefore, it remains of concern that the reintroduction of more elephants might only postpone the extinction of this population of elephants. Importantly, in addition, even if more elephants were introduced into the forest, they would not necessarily be inclined to remain in the forest.

According to the data collected by SANParks, the native female elephant is approximately 50 years old and she has been alone since at least 2016. Analysis of her faeces by SANParks has indicated she is not stressed unless approached by humans, this includes sounds and vibrations she might associate with human activities, or people attempting to track her.

**PREN Shares SANParks Continued Measured Approach to the Management of the Knysna Elephant and Expresses Concerns About the Proposed Introduction of Elephants to the Knysna Forest**

According to media reports, the proposed group of elephants that are being considered for introduction to the Knsyna forest area would be a "herd" from the Knysna Elephant Park (KEP), a captive elephant business owned by Lisette & Ian Withers. The Knysna Elephant Park offers daily experiences and free and semi-protected contact with the elephants who are trained and controlled by handlers.

In May 2014 the NSPCA laid animal cruelty charges against Elephants of Eden, the current Knysna Elephant Park, their directors and management including Lizette Withers, in terms of the Animals Protection Act, 71 of 1962 for cruelty to elephants after the NSPCA received footage depicting cruel and abusive training methods employed to control and train elephants for the elephant-based tourist industry.

**Photographs: NSPCA**

**"Walking with the elephants" at KEP – Jan 2024 - Images provided to PREN**

In July 2015 Indalu Safaris cc, trading as Knysna Elephant Park, was charged and found guilty of being in contravention of Section 44(1) (a) of Ordinance 19 of 1974 for the period 1 December 2003 to 30 November 2009, wrongfully and unlawfully importing into, exporting from or transporting through the Western Cape Province a protected wild animal, to wit sixteen (16) African elephant *(Loxodonta* africana), without a permit authorising the accused to do so.

In 2022 the EMS Foundation, a member of PREN, wrote to CapeNature referencing the death of an elephant handler at KEP in 2021.

In a natural environment adult male and female elephants live separately in differently structured societies. The basic social grouping, known as a family unit, is a group of related females which may consist of a mother and her young, together with her grown daughters and their offspring. The activity of the group and their movements are led by the 'matriach', who is normally the oldest female in the herd. She often walks at or near the front of the herd, with another large female taking up the rear. Herds can range from 2 to 24 animals; when the number of elephants in a group becomes larger, it gradually splits into two or more subunits, along kin lines. The resultant separate families will continue to associate closely, spending between 35 to 70% of their time together. From 12-15 years of age, young bulls will spend over 50% of their time away from the family unit, finally leaving entirely to join other males in loose associations that forage in areas distinct from those of family groups.

To the best of our knowledge there are currently five female elephants at the Knysna Elephant Park; their history does not suggest that they constitute a naturally bonded herd:

| Name Elephant | Approx. Age | Relationship | Origin |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sally | 35 | Unrelated | Wild caught in Kruger |
| Nandi | 32 | Mother of Thandi | Wild caught in Kruger |
| Thandi | 21 | Daughter of Nandi | Captive born |
| Keisha | 20 | Unrelated | Mother died. She arrived at KEP |
| Thato | 21 | Unrelated | Wild caught at Sandhurst |

In addition, it would be incorrect to assume that the addition of new elephants to the Knysna forest would solve the issue of the lone native female by providing her with some company.

The study published by Dr Rob Atkinson and Dr Keith Lindsay entitled, EXPANSIVE, DIVERSE HABITATS ARE VITAL FOR THE WELFARE OF ELEPHANTS addresses the **complex social structures and socio-dynamics in elephants**:

*Wild elephants live in a layered society with the family as the base unit. They, though, naturally interact with hundreds of other elephants at different layers of the hierarchy over the course of a year. This includes multiple friendship groups, families, clans, bachelor bull associations and sub-populations, interacting in a consensual association or avoidance.*

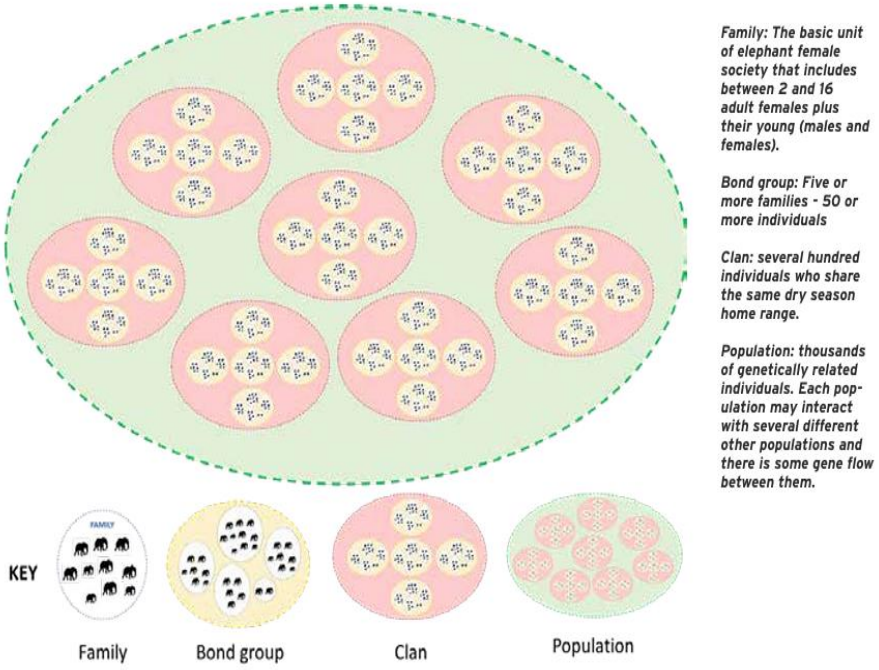


Image credit: **EXPANSIVE, DIVERSE HABITATS ARE VITAL FOR THE WELFARE OF ELEPHANTS**

## Important Considerations and Questions

Before any decision is taken about the reintroduction of more elephants to the Knysna forest, a number of questions should be answered, these include, but are not limited to the following:

### Concerns Relating to Elephant Biology

1. Would it be appropriate, and indeed humane, to introduce human-trained elephants to a difficult foreign, natural environment?
   With their history of trauma, alleged abuse and controls on their behaviour, and reliance on humans for sustenance they are very unlikely to be able to face the challenges of the forest unless they are guided through a long rehabilitation process.
2. If these are the elephants that are being considered, has it been noted that they do not form a natural herd but they are rather elephants who have been forced together in captivity?
   It is not possible to predict whether the formerly captive elephants would choose to remain together in a cohesive group or to move and forage independently of each other, once they are given the freedom to make their own decisions. It is equally impossible to predict, or assume, that the resident female would choose to form associations with any introduced elephants.
3. These elephants could potentially continue to rely on their handlers to supplement them with additional food. While the native female might have adapted to this kind of environment, sufficient nutrients might be difficult to find and, consequently, wholly inadequate for the new “herd”.
4. Even considering the new land acquisitions from SANParks, does the forest provide the ideal amount of vegetation for the eclectic diet healthy elephants need? This should include, according to biologist

and ethologist Dr Joyce Poole, a world authority on elephant reproductive, communicative, and cognitive behaviour, a variety of nutrients normally found across several landscapes and habitats. Grasses, herbs, leaves, roots, branches, bark, seed pods, and lianas should be available to the elephants. Will any imported elephants be able to adopt the habits of the native female elephant, who is likely to have gained her knowledge of feeding grounds and survival skills through learning passed down through generations?
Closed canopy primary forests have very limited ground-level vegetation available as food for wildlife, and forest-dwelling elephants tend to have large home ranges, which may also include forest clearings or adjacent areas of more open, secondary habitat. The preference for open, non-forest, habitats was noted for the elephants released in the earlier, unsuccessful operation.

5. How will human-habituated elephants bond and remain in close proximity to an elephant who is easily stressed by any human activity, as the SANParks study on stress hormone levels confirmed?
   If the handlers are to remain with the introduced herd, we can naturally assume that the native female will stay away from the introduced herd. In sum, the proposed initiative is very likely to fail in achieving social mixing of the introduced animals with the resident elephant – the primary reason given by proponents of this essentially speculative gamble.
6. Which elephant experts have been appointed to design and manage this project?
7. Which elephant relocation experts have been appointed to design and manage the evacuation and relocation of the elephants?
8. Were specific tenders published?

### Human Aspects and Concerns

9. Have the surrounding communities been informed of the risks, including potential conflicts relating to land use practices, of introducing more elephants to the Knysna forest?
10. What training will the elephant handlers receive about the proposed evacuation, relocation, release and rewilding of the elephants?
11. Has the forest been recently fenced with elephant-proof fencing to protect both the elephants and the surrounding communities? If not, how will SANParks ensure the elephants won't walk out into neighbouring fields, as they did in the previous project, looking for forage that is more nutritional than can be found under closed forest canopy? Intolerance and human-wildlife conflict are particularly exacerbated when pre-existing residents are not accustomed to sharing the land with newly introduced large wildlife.
12. Who will be liable for any damages or loss of life?
13. Who will fund the project?
14. Is this being floated as a tourism opportunity? Have the details of this opportunity been published? Who will benefit from this tourist opportunity?
15. Who would train the elephant handlers to work in the Knysna forest? How will the elephants be monitored? Will the elephants be fitted with collars? Who will monitor their movements?

## Conclusion

PREN is **not** in support of the initiative to introduce captive elephants to the Knysna forest.

Members of PREN favour SANParks' cautious, non-invasive and scientific-based approach to the management of the Knysna forest elephant.

PREN members are cognisant of all the factors that have culminated in the difficult life of the female elephant living in the Knysna forest. We would want to prevent any further complications or create any additional stress for her, and would rather see her live out her final few years in relative peace.

The hormone stress analysis confirms she is coping, while her response to human presence plus her current age makes us think that it would be extremely difficult, risky and probably cruel to force her to confront a group of naïve and inexperienced elephants which might be released into her familiar home range. It would be equally cruel to capture and move her elsewhere, in the process putting her through the complex logistics of a capture, relocation and release in another reserve. It is not predictable how she could cope with a new, completely foreign environment having been born and spent her entire life in the forest.

PREN members who have signed this document welcome the vision to rehabilitate and release into a more natural environment, other than the Knysna forest, the chosen group of five captive female elephants from Knysna Elephant Park. The individual needs of each of these five elephants must be separately and carefully considered.

PREN elephant specialists are available to engage further if any assistance is required.

Yours sincerely,

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