

MET Hits Back on Hunt Quotas

The environment ministry, which has of late been slammed internationally for issuing hunting permits where the so-called desert elephant roam, has made it clear that there is no such thing as what people are referring to as desert elephants.

In a strongly worded statement issued by the ministry spokesperson Romeo Muyunda, it dismissed false allegations and reports that government has approved the hunting of three elephants in north-western Namibia which will cause the extinction of the so-called desert elephants.

Elephants occur across the entire north of Namibia with two main sub-populations in the north-eastern and the north-western parts of the country.

The ministry said that the elephants in Kunene and Erongo regions are being referred to by some people as 'desert elephants' because of their ability to live in arid conditions where annual rainfall is less than 150mm.

"From what we know today, this ability is not due to any genetic adaptation but through their knowledge of the terrain, high mobility and physical endurance. They are nevertheless the same species of elephants that occur elsewhere in the country and are scientifically known as *Loxodonta africana*."

Muyunda said strictly speaking there is no such entity as a 'desert elephant'.

"All our elephants are African elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) and not desert elephants. It is unfortunate that some people interested in marketing elephants as tourism attractions or those against hunting, continue to refer to them as desert elephants with the apparent intention of implying endangerment or imminent extinction of these elephants. These elephants are not at risk of extinction at all, in fact, their numbers have increased to the highest level in at least half a century," said Muyunda.

According to him, human-wildlife conflict is escalating due to increased population size and range expansion, as well as changes in land use, and in 2016 the number of problem-causing animal incidents reported to the ministry was 5 000.

According to Muyunda in some unfortunate incidents, human lives were lost due to elephant attacks. Addressing human-wildlife conflict requires striking a balance between conservation priorities and the needs of people living with wildlife, he said, adding that elephant-human conflict is not new in the Kunene and Erongo regions.

According to the ministry the aggression of the elephants and their new migration patterns inland are indications of disturbances in the Ugab River, probably caused more by irresponsible eco-tourism and vehicles than anything else.

"Some NGOs and individuals even name these elephants for tourist attraction or other reasons, a practice that the ministry strongly opposes. Elephants are wild animals, not pets, not domesticated animals.

Reports have also been received of the use of camera drones being flown too close to elephant herds and accordingly disturbing such herds. Wilful disturbance of a specially protected species is a punishable offence."

Tourism in general and trophy hunting in particular has grown to be one of the most important industries in Namibia in terms of its strong contribution to the gross domestic product, employment creation and the well-being and social upliftment of rural people, not to mention being the main economic driver for the protection of wildlife habitat, the ministry said.

According to Muyunda, the ministry is however aware of specific NGOs and individuals who are working against the wildlife conservation activities of the government and the sustainable utilisation of wildlife resources by rural communities through the conservancy programme.

"This has negative implications for our Community Based Natural Resource Management Programme, which has been widely recognised as an innovative and successful people-oriented approach to conservation. We have become recognised as a leader in this field. We have restored the link between conservation and rural development by enabling communal farmers to derive a direct benefit and income from the sustainable use of wildlife and tourism activities."

Muyunda said these specific NGOs and individuals have no research permits for conducting research on elephants in the two regions or elsewhere in the country, and they at best only have short-term local and anecdotal information to support their claims. "Neither do they have operating agreements with the government through the ministry.

Their activities and pronouncements on elephant conservation are seemingly not intended to foster cooperation with the ministry and other wildlife conservation stakeholders and we urge them to refrain from this irresponsible behaviour. The ministry cannot let them create confusion amongst rural communities or the public and to tarnish Namibia's conservation achievements."

Hunting and population growth

According to Muyunda, two elephants are included on the game utilisation quota for this year for Ohungu and Otjimboyo Conservancies (one for conservation hunting and one for own use), and one other elephant has been declared a problem animal in the Sorris Sorris Conservancy. These three elephants are the subject of the media articles and letters received by the ministry.

"It is important to note that the ministry may well have decided to destroy these elephants. Making them available to be hunted is, however, the preferred strategy, as some revenue can be generated in the process for the relevant communities," said Muyunda.

Communal area conservancies manage about 19% of communal land in Namibia and thus over 250 000 people live within these conservancies. To date, there are 83 registered conservancies that generate over N\$50 million from consumptive and non-consumptive utilisation of wildlife including hunting of elephants, per year.

The ministry said since most elephants in the northwest, except the population in Etosha National Park, occur on communal lands it is essential to ensure that resident communities will tolerate elephants in the long term.

"Co-existence with elephants implies that a balance is needed between the costs that they incur and the benefits that can be derived from them."

The ministry added that today there are more elephants in Namibia than at any time in the past 100 years.

In 1995, Namibia had about 7 000 elephants and in 2004 the total population was estimated at about 16 000 animals, while the current figure is just over 22 000 elephants.

According to Muyunda this is the highest recorded number since population surveys commenced which shows a continuous positive growth trajectory.

The north-western population based on aerial surveys is estimated at 4 627 animals.

Estimated figures in 2015 indicated that there are 2 911 elephants in Etosha National Park 2015 and 1 716 elephants in the northwest (Erongo, Kunene and Omusati Regions) estimated in 2016.

"Elephants occur as far south as the Ugab River and occasionally in the Omaruru River and in most of the river catchments that flow westwards to the Atlantic Ocean in the north, and have been expanding their range in the past two decades," said Muyunda.

The north-eastern population numbers are estimated at over 19 549.

"Movements between different populations sporadically occur, providing opportunities for genetic interchange. Numbers will be monitored through aerial surveys at two- to three-year intervals," said Muyunda.

"Namibia's elephant population and the Kunene and Erongo population in particular, is a healthy and growing population. It is growing at about 3.3% per year. The current levels of consumptive off-take are extremely conservative. They are well below sustainable off-take levels, and the population continues to grow and expand."

Muyunda said one of the reasons for the increase in numbers is that the animals have a value, communities have rights to manage and use the wildlife, and are starting to earn significant income from wildlife.

This is creating the incentives for them to look after and protect wildlife and wildlife habitat all of which leads to a positive conservation result.