5,000 elephants must die. Here's why

By Fred Bridgland
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We sat down to a hot meal of maize porridge and elephant and onion mince, swigged down with Castle lager, at the end of a hard day. I had spent it with Kruger Park game ranger Jack Greef, who had been dispatching African elephants with high-velocity 7.62 bullets fired behind their ears and into their brains.

"Don't ask me if I enjoyed today," Jack warned me gruffly. "Elephants are beautiful creatures. Of all the animals in the Kruger Park I respect the elephant most. We play God, but we are not God. Every time you cull it takes something away from you. This is not a nice job, but it has to be done."

That was 12 years ago. I had just watched one of the last culls of elephants in the Kruger Park. Jack and his team killed an entire family of 300 matriarchs and youngsters that day, in the annual cull that kept the Kruger elephant population at a steady 7500 to prevent heavy destruction of vegetation and allow other species to flourish.

Under pressure from con servation purists such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and the Washington-based Humane Society, a moratorium was later called on annual elephant culls. As a result the Kruger elephant population has grown to 13,000 and the great park – roughly the size of Israel – is suffering such huge damage that culling is about to be reintroduced.

Anticipating the inevitable international outcry, the South African National Parks (SANP) board last week held a conference in the Kruger Park to discuss the pros and cons of elephant culling – or killing, if your prefer. The great elephant debate featured scientists, academics, animal welfare groups, private nature reserves and representatives of neighbouring countries and of the Afri can communities that border the Kruger.

The latter, ruthlessly ignored in the long history of African wildlife conservation, were the most important representatives. Unlike Western animal rights activists, who take for granted phones, electricity, water, sewage, hospitals, roads and three meals a day, African villagers have to tolerate elephants that wreck their fields, strip their trees and occasionally

take their lives.

The conference tossed around various options for managing wild elephants, including translocation, contraception and culling, in preparation for a national and international debate before a decision is made next April on what should be done to control the Kruger population. Few doubt that the final decision will be to cull 1000 Kruger elephants a year for five years to return the population to the 1992 level.

Hector Mangome, director of conservation services with SANP, said a management plan had already been drawn up for the cull because large trees over 15 feet in height were being rapidly destroyed, along with other dense vegetation habitats favoured by animals that are more threatened than elephants, such as the rare black rhino and highly endangered antelopes such as the roan, tsessebe, Livingstone's suni and the splendid, rufous-golden Lichtenstein's hartebeest.

It has to be accepted, Africa's wild animals having been fenced in, that their numbers have to be controlled accordingly, argue men like Greef, Mangome and others who love these magnificent creatures. When the Kruger Park was created at the end of the Boer war in 1902, by Major James Stevenson-Hamilton, a short, stocky Scot who was Laird of Fairholm in Lanarkshire, there were only a handful of elephants there. The rest had been wiped out by prodigious European hunting and the ravaging rinderpest disease that swept down from central Africa in the late 1890s.

Gradually rehabilitating the small stocks of survivors and adding land to the park wherever possible, Stevenson-Hamilton painstakingly grew his herd of Kruger elephants to just 65 animals by 1918.

The Laird of Fairholm "reigned" over Kruger for 44 years, and by 1954, eight years after he retired, 514 elephants were counted. By 1970 the Kruger elephants, descendants of the few Stevenson-Hamilton rescued, were 9000 strong and inflicting huge damage on the delicate and varied Kruger ecosystems. The annual culls began.

In the Africa of old, implanted romantically in Western consciousness by films such as the Tarzan series and Where No Vultures Fly, elephants dispersed naturally, moving on as herds expanded and stripped areas bare of vegetation, allowing them to recover. In modern Africa, people – and especially peasants in picturesque- looking grass huts – no more like elephants trampling over their maize and bananas than suburban Scottish man would welcome elephants uprooting his tomato plants and dahlias. Wild elephants that survive through this new century will do so only behind fences.

By 1978 a 20-year project to fence the entire Kruger Park had been completed. But this ended migration possibilities, and elephant concentrations became unnaturally dense. Elephants are prone to sudden tastes, and vegetation surveys showed they were

eliminating great swathes of spectacular baobab trees – often more than 70ft tall and up to 4000 years old – and knob thorns, the favourite nesting places of vultures.

Kruger scientists set to work to come up with proposals on the elephant-holding capacity of the fenced park.

"We had to permit the herds their traditional role of modifying vegetation patterns, but not bey ond the point where they could wreak havoc on vegetation and on other animals' habitats," Dr Salomon Joubert, former executive director of the Kruger Park, told me. The number decided upon was 7500.

I expect next year to sit again with someone like Jack Greef at the end of a day of culling, a highly complex exercise, with vultures settled in the trees all around and hyenas and wild dogs lurking in the distance, as "disposal teams" of Shangaans, some of the best trackers and bush experts on the African continent, clad in white boots and overalls, move among the circle of dead elephants.

They will perform their necessary but grisly chores – first slitting the great beasts' throats with a single panga slash, causing immense rivers of blood to flow, and then eviscerating the elephants, at which point scientists will move in to remove treasured bits of tissue for research.

As Jack and I watched in 1992, samples were taken, for example, from foetuses of dead cow elephants, which were to be sent to a zoologist at Australia's Monash University, recruited by the Kenyan Parks Board to produce a contraceptive for its wild elephants. Western admin istrators of Kenya's Masai Mara game reserve had refused to kill any elephants, and condemned the Kruger cull, but had a major problem with desertification, and also with unfenced animals stampeding through villages and killing people.

The irony was that the Masai Mara administrators were willing to take tissue from dead South African elephants in an attempt to save Kenyan elephants – and, incidentally, people.

As yet, contraception is not the answer to elephant overpopulation. But no doubt the Kenyans, keeping as low a profile as possible, will be back next year to take their samples as the Kruger Park elephant cull is renewed.