

Anti-hunting groups have misfired

DAVID MABUNDA

ON MAY 10 and 17 this year, The Sunday Independent published two articles based on an earlier interview I had graciously agreed to on Eleanor Mombert's request.

The publication of the interview in two segments elicited vitriolic and venomous attacks on my personal integrity after comments I made were misinterpreted by my detractors as reflective of SANParks' policy on the sustainable use of natural resources.

Contrary to what was said by my critics, I never wrote any article or opinion piece for The Sunday Independent. The interview was about my personal history and put forward a wide variety of positions and perspectives on conservation matters. Regrettably my critics cooked a storm in a teacup over the "juicy bits" - culling and sustainable hunting.

I'm left wondering what crime I committed that warranted the "blitzkrieg" response from the regional director of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), Mr Jasson Bell-Leask ("Pitfalls of an outdated approach to conservation management", May 24) and Animal Rights Africa (ARA) represented by Michelle Pickover and Steve Smit ("SANParks is hiding behind indefensible excuses", May 31).

IFAW and ARA, although different in their architecture and gearing, are joined at the waist in opposing any form of sustainable-use practices and culling of animals, including elephants.

They seem to be too focused, obsessed even, on issues that only form a relatively minor part of managing a complex and diverse conservation organisation like SANParks in the 21st century and the importance of compliance with one of the main objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) - to ensure that biodiversity conservation translates into access and benefit-sharing for the socio-economic upliftment of poor communities living adjacent to protected areas.

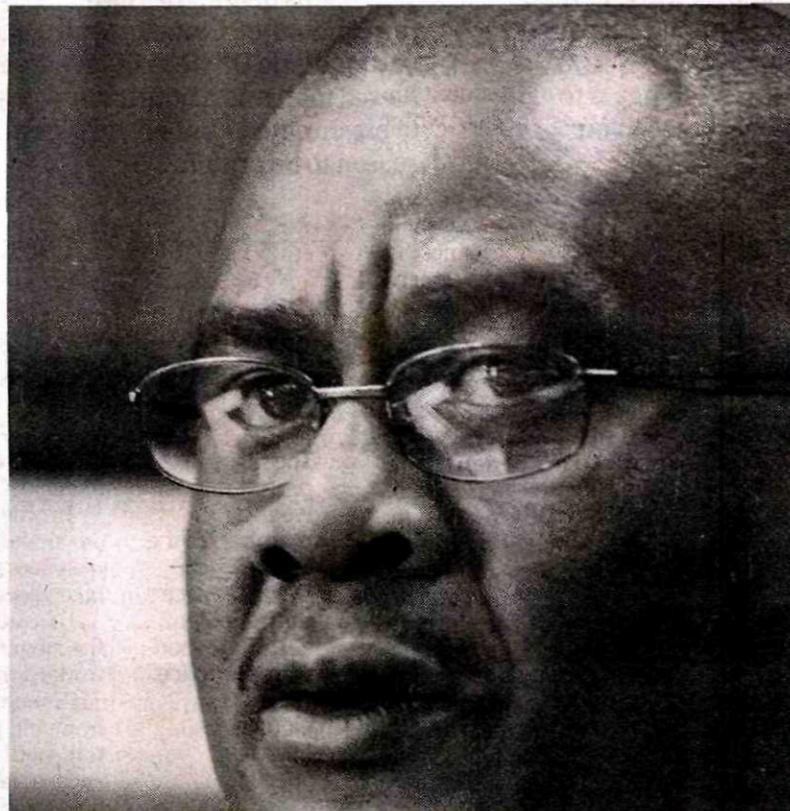
Their morbid views lead to inappropriate investment into trendy "conservation initiatives" of one kind or another to discredit successful state conservation institutions and liken its leadership to the

apartheid-era conservation managers.

A strong, financially viable and functional state conservation institution is not in the interest of any animal rights and welfare NGO because its independence from donor funding to execute its primary functions limits opportunities for animal rights and welfare NGOs to influence the conservation policies of the state. The references to "failed conservation policies or outdated approaches to conservation" are nothing but grand public relations stunts.

Let me repeat my earlier responses to the lie peddled by our detractors that SANParks is allowing Kruger Park animals to be hunted on community-owned land adjacent to it. Nothing could be further from the truth. We have done no such thing. We are a responsible national custodian of the national park system. The fact that the Timbavati game reserve (as part of the Association of Private Nature Reserves) hunts certain quotas in terms of the historical agreement that was entered into with the previous SANParks leadership is a truism inherited from the past. The matter has been contested in the High Court and the said court, based on evidence before it, ruled in favour of Timbavati. My advice to the anti-hunting lobby is to take this matter to the Appeal Court rather than levelling false accusations at SANParks. It is clear to all and sundry that this is an anti-hunting campaign directed at a soft target.

I categorically deny that SANParks is "pushing the agenda of the powerful commercial hunting industry", and certainly I'm not their apologetic spokesman. Why would I take such a burden when I already have the huge task of managing one of the largest and most complex conservation agencies in the world? Hunting is a legal land use in this country in certain designated areas, bar national parks, and indeed there is a tiny band of hunters who are bringing the industry into disrepute through their unethical practices. It is not for SANParks to "police" these shenanigans but to refer any such repugnant deeds to law enforcement agencies. The entire debate on hunting is being addressed by the Department of Water and Environmental Affairs and should not be directed to SAN-



David Mabunda argues that animal rights activists have obfuscated the real issues involved.

Parks. Our mandate does not have a single reference to "hunting" in it.

I'm not a hunter myself and no dead animals "grace" my lounge - but I'm not opposed to those who hunt. It is their democratic right to do so just as it is the democratic right for people to associate with animal rights NGOs in this country.

The public has been left with a mistaken image of our policy on the sustainable use of resources which was deliberately misconstrued to fit the ARA and IFAW attacks on SANParks. We were accused of killing South Africa's heritage.

The Protected Areas Act of 2003, as amended, excludes any form of extractive use including mining and hunting in national parks.

We can't even dig river sand for construction, maintenance and renovation of infrastructure work or "harvest" firewood. Park managers have to source such commodities from outside the parks.

Our sustainable-use policy is premised on the international precepts of article 10 of the CBD which calls on all parties to:

- Integrate consideration of the conservation and sustainable use of biological resources into national decision-making systems;

- Adopt measures relating to the use of biological resources to avoid or minimise adverse impacts on biological diversity;

- Protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation;

- Support local populations to develop and implement remedial action in degraded areas and where biological diversity has been reduced; and

- Encourage co-operation between its governmental authorities and its private sector in developing methods of sustainable use of biological resources.

The mainstay of sustainable use in national parks is ecotourism activities, which underpin our objective of using tourism as a conservation strategy.

In 2000 we joined our communities outside Kruger Park and

repaired public infrastructure such as roads, bridges, schools, clinics and boreholes after floods that had disrupted the lives of the local communities.

Communities constitute BEE partners in our luxury lodge concessions businesses.

We have created medicinal nurseries for indigenous use in line with traditional and cultural practices to support communities where there is no (medical) doctor. We are the biggest sponsors of food security gardens and allow communities to supply our restaurant outlets with their produce. Our entire procurement and commercial activities account for a large slice of sustainable use.

We educate approximately 150 000 learners per annum in all the parks at huge cost. We offer bursaries and scholarships for university studies and employ the graduates in the various careers available.

Our track record in implementing sustainable use is broad and has no peer. We are assisting adjacent communities to set up buffer zones for ecotourism purposes in Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) outreach programmes. Recently we have provided the Mjejane community with animals worth over R40m for its ecotourism venture in the Hectorspruit area. None of these animals will be hunted.

In the 2006/07 financial year we commissioned an independent study of the economic impacts of the existence of national parks through Urban Econ, peer-reviewed by the University of Pretoria. The study found that SANParks created approximately 100 000 jobs directly and indirectly through various industry sectors such as construction, tour operating, travel and car hire, retail outlets, lodges in private nature reserves surrounding national parks, various procurement opportunities for small SMMEs etc.

It would be interesting to see what animal rights and welfare NGOs have done for our society besides megaphone politics in newspaper columns and radio stations.

Perhaps ARA and the Southern Africa regional IFAW want to emulate the "success" that IFAW and the Humane Society of the US (HSUS) achieved in Kenya in 2004 when they successfully lobbied the president not to sign an important

amendment to the Wildlife Act (World Economics Vol 8, No 2 April-June 2007). Hunting and sustainable use policies were banned in Kenya in 1977 with the heavy lobbying of animal rights and welfare NGOs, thus triggering unintended backdoor plundering of wildlife for the bush meat trade.

This led to private land owners having little interest in practising wildlife economics in the same manner as the private nature reserves do in South Africa. In general, wildlife in Kenya has declined by between 60 percent and 70 percent (World Economics Vol 8, No 2, April-June 2007).

Take the matter to the Appeal Court, rather than falsely accusing SANParks

The proposed amendment to the Wildlife Act to provide for greater participation of wildlife landowners who owned rangelands, and to address the issue of compensation for the loss of human life and damage to property, thus transformed conservation management practice.

The amendment came from the floor of the House, went through all the required procedures, debates and public consultations, including the Attorney-General's office, and was properly voted on by parliamentarians.

However, the foreign animal rights and welfare NGOs were able to hijack the entire consultative process by shipping in rent-a-mob crowds who successfully reduced everything to an endless shouting match about the amendment being a ploy to "re-introduce hunting and sustainable use" in Kenya.

IFAW launched a massively well-funded publicity campaign in newspapers and on TV with posters in Nairobi and the international airport. Noticeable by their silence were the established progressive

international conservation NGOs, including the WWF, African Wildlife Foundation and the IUCN, all of which have regional offices in Kenya. They were frightened off by IFAW's publicity campaign and the threat of being labeled as advocates of "killing animals for fun".

No one has any objection to IFAW or ARA holding an opinion, but one can and must question the lengths they are prepared to go to achieve their objectives. I argue that such objectives are not in the interest of conservation in Africa but to please their masters in the northern hemisphere.

As Deepak Lal elegantly puts it: "Foreign NGOs claim to speak on behalf of the world's poor but in fact speak the language of the world's rich and invariably seek their own agendas and purpose rather than those they purport to help. Through their financial strength and access to political elites, especially in poor countries, they are able to subvert the representative democratic process and insinuate foreign minority views into what are supposedly parliamentary majority voting systems." (Lal, 2006, *Reviving the Invisible Hand: the case for classical liberalism in the 21st Century*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.)

I thank the South African government for its commitment to fund conservation in this country, thus saving us from the vagaries of the likes of IFAW and other animal rights and welfare organisations as is the case in other African countries where these NGOs rule the roost. ARA might argue that it is indigenous to Africa, but its links (as displayed on its website) with the international animal rights fraternity place it squarely in the realm of this new form of colonialism and imperialism.

The current leadership at SANParks was raised and shaped between the hammer and the anvil of the liberation struggle, and as such it will not support policies that are at odds with the protection of the dignity of conservation, indigenous people and the national heritage for the equitable benefit of all and make national parks the pride and joy of all citizens.

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