



G&H: Why do so few landowners / reserves (with big enough land) have the big five on their land?

Hanru: Few landowners have the capital to keep these animals. Very high costs are required in terms of infra-structure and management to ensure that animals are managed in an ecologically correct and profitable way. For most landowners with big five on their land, elephant and lion are the main stumbling blocks since they require management at the highest level to ensure they become part of a sustainable ecosystem. With lion, the challenge is to keep the correct number of animals in relation to the correct number and composition of prey animals, without exceeding the carrying capacity of the land. Elephant, on the other hand, may destroy the land and even the aesthetic appeal of an area.

Banie: I think there is a lack of knowledge when it comes to this sensitive issue. If a landowner wants to keep these animals, he needs to make sure his motives are sound and that he is familiar with the advantages and disadvantages. Consider the fact that keeping these animals for tourism reasons involves dangerous animals and if your management and control do not allow safe conditions it is better not to stock them. They sometimes cause ecological problems and this is one of the main reasons they are not kept on many farms.

Renée: For practical reasons it is difficult for landowners to keep these animals: elephants may destroy the habitat, fences are expensive, and lions may have to be fed, and if you have other expensive species on your land, losses may be high due to predation. Furthermore, landowners cannot utilise these animals on a sustainable basis due to regulations by the government that limit sustainable use.

G&H: Do we really conserve the whole ecosystem if we do not restore animals that historically used to occur in that area ?

Hanru: The aim should be to re-establish everything that used to occur in an area but the question should always be whether these big five animals occurred in that specific area.

Elephant on a game farm will ensure a new experience for the owner



There is just something different about a big five reserve, something that makes the imagination go. "What if we get stuck in a breeding herd of elephant?" "If my vehicle breaks down – will I make it to the camp without becoming dinner?" "What should my first reaction be when I come across a lioness staring me in the face at 30 m?" Some thoughts are frightening but in a sense exhilarating ... small wonder tourists are prepared to pay thousands every year to experience a big five reserve. This is one of Africa's trademarks – not visiting a big five reserve in Africa (South Africa, for that matter) is like visiting Egypt without seeing the pyramids.

But why are there so few big five reserves? With 7 000 and more game farms, it is really sometimes difficult to find a big five reserve without visiting the regular well-known reserves or parks. Many of the game ranchers are not interested in production, and conservation is one of their first priorities. Can one, however, really conserve a total ecosystem without restoring and re-establishing some of the animals that used to occur in that area? What would the main reasons be for the low number of big five reserves?

We contacted two managers of Limpopo Province game farms/reserves that are big enough to sustain big five animals, to get their opinions on the matter. Our panel consists of Hanru Strydom, conservation manager at Shambala Game Lodge, a big five reserve near Vaalwater; and Banie Holtzhausen, reserve manager for the Elandsberg Collaborative Nature Reserve near Rooiberg, where only some of the less dangerous big five animals occur. Finally, we spoke to Renée Andreka, ecologist and game farmer from Marble Hall.

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Conservation can be undertaken at a lower level without these animals.

Banie: Remember, there are different aspects of conservation – the ideal would have been re-establishing animals on areas where they historically occurred. Re-establishment of big five animals is, however, very expensive and intense and not always justifiable for conservation reasons only.

Renée: Does conservation not mean to prevent a species from becoming extinct by conserving the genetic stability of the species? Where you do it does not matter – even in a zoo.

G&H: Do the disadvantages of keeping big five animals on game farm land weigh so much heavier than the advantages?

Hanru: Advantages only weigh heavier than disadvantages with years of dedicated work and management.

Banie: In our case, where hunting and tourism are equally important, we have decided that the disadvantages are higher than the advantages – tourism involves specialised management to ensure safety of tourists. Although many overseas hunters will enjoy hunting on a big five reserve, we have realised that we can do equally well with the hunting of non-dangerous (or rather, less dangerous) exclusive animals like buffalo, roan and sable antelope.

Renée: Limiting legislation, high costs and damage to the habitat are all negatives at the top of the list that weigh heavier than the advantages.

Intensive management is often required for lion



Gert Fourie comments:

There is no doubt about it – keeping and management of big five animals on a game farm do require capital and management skills on the highest level.

This is one of the main reasons for the small number of big five ranches in South Africa. Other reasons that were given are:

- The size of the land required is a limiting factor.
- Safety – many landowners buy land for their family to enjoy; the moment dangerous animals occur the use of the land is limited.
- Population control is a problem – most of the time the size of the land limits the number of animals, but they keep on reproducing. Legislation, emotional green organisations and conflicting activities on the land limit control activities on the land.

Despite all these potential stumbling blocks, keeping the big five may still be a very rewarding step to take and financially beneficial if the tourist market is well explored. If you consider introducing these animals on your land take the following aspects into account:

1. Consult with an expert before you spend money on fences and other infrastructure.
2. Get approval from the conservation authorities – you will need permits to transport and keep any of these animals on your land.
3. If your land is too small, consider a collaborative nature reserve by involving some of your like-minded neighbours and dropping fences. The bigger, the better.
4. Ensure that the carrying capacity of your land is able to sustain these animals over a long period. Again, you will have to acquire the services of an expert consultant.
5. Follow a well-planned management plan and monitoring program on the land to ensure optimal utilisation and prevent degradation of the habitat.
6. A possible solution for the landowner who is concerned about the safety of his family is to fence out a separate area where hiking, mountain biking, quad biking and other activities can be performed safely.
7. Think five or ten years ahead – have a plan for controlling the population and an escape plan if you need to abort the project.
8. Get the cooperation of your neighbours – inform them about the benefits (additional tourism) and potential problems (escapees).

For more information or assistance with the planning and management of a big five reserve, contact Gert or Nanette Fourie (Ekofocus) at 082 9295277 or email at info@ekofocus.co.za. Also see www.ekofocus.co.za

