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Barbara Creecy's wildlife panel is trying to reinvent the wheel

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South Africa's drive to use wild animals as commercial trade goods has been ratcheted up a notch with the appointment of a high-level panel to review the policies, legislation and practices of breeding, hunting and trading of elephants, lions, leopards and rhinos.



This pregnant rhino became another victim of poaching when she was killed for her horns. Picture: Susan Scott

The panel's terms of reference and the people appointed by Environment, Forestry and Fisheries Minister Barbara Creecy make it extremely unlikely to support wildlife welfare and conservation.

The appointment of the panel follows the almost surreptitious listing late last year of 32 wild animals under the Animal Improvement Act – effectively declaring them farm animals – and a proposal in February to list nearly 100 more under the Meat Safety Act.

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The question needs to be asked why such a panel is required at all.

The answers the minister wants from it can all be found in existing – and excellent – draft National Norms and Standards for the Management of Elephants in South Africa, published in the Government Gazette on November 2 2018.

These norms and standards, a body of work created by 70 experts, was started in 2007.

A consolidation of those norms are in a bill that has been awaiting the minister's signature since November 2018.

Answers can also be found in the reports of several conferences over the past two years.

So what is the panel about? The answer seems to be in its composition.

The 25 members include 16 people whose experience is in hunting, cultural matters, land policy, traditional authorities, gender rights and sustainable use.

A notable absence are experts in key fields of study (it has only two elephant specialists and no lion scientists) and many have a vested financial interest in an outcome that endorses a legal trade in lion breeding, rhino horn and ivory.

That the managing director of a game-meat company lands a place on the panel ahead of a veteran elephant authority like Rudi van Aarde, professor of zoology and chair of the Conservation Ecology Research Unit at the University of Pretoria

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In the matter of conservation, the meat director's input can hardly be expected to be impartial.

Traditional leaders are well represented on the panel, but in the terms of reference, there's only one reference to the communities they purport to represent.

“ CREECY APPEARS TO BE RE-INVENTING THE WHEEL UNTIL IT ROLLS IN THE DIRECTION SHE WANTS. ”

— ANGUS BEGG

In announcing the high-level panel, Creecy made its mandate clear: “Among the focus areas are the keeping in captivity and hunting of elephant and rhino, the ivory trade, rhino anti-poaching and anti-trafficking measures and community empowerment, as well as leopard hunting and the trade in leopard skins.

The panel will probe, among others, the breeding of lion in captivity, the hunting of lion, and the trade in lion bones and skins.”

The EMS Foundation has taken issue with the minister.

“Why is such an advisory committee required at all?” asked foundation director Michelle Pickover. “Do we need yet another panel?”

EMS submitted a list of experts it considered appropriate to the task, but received no reply from Creecy's department.

The matter of lions in captivity and trade in lion bones was already dealt with by the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee for Environmental Affairs in December 2018.

Its report, adopted by the National Assembly, found that there “was an overwhelming consensus for the need to bring an end to the controversial aspects of the captive lion breeding industry in South Africa”.

Why is Creecy ignoring these reports, norms and recommendations?

According to environmental economist and researcher Ross Harvey, in establishing the panel, the department possibly wants to generate “evidence” it can use to avoid signing the norms and standards.

“It's quite clear from the scientific evidence that we should avoid the intensive breeding of wild animals – not only lions,” he says.

“But the minister appears to think otherwise.”

Creecy appears to be re-inventing the wheel until it rolls in the direction she wants.



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Barbara Creecy

The panel, says Pickover, will reopen debates to which conclusions have already been agreed on in other regulations and conferences.

This includes the culling of elephants (abandoned by the Kruger National Park years ago), canned hunting (condemned by Parliament), trade in rhino horn (banned by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), trophy hunting (criticised worldwide), and the farming of wild animals for meat and animal parts.

A letter to the department from the Wildlife Animal Protection Forum of South Africa signed by 22 environmentalists and scientists lists the above concerns and concludes that the panel runs the risk of being institutionally biased.

“A candidate with vested interests in the continuation of captive predator breeding or captive-origin lion hunting,” they write, “appears unlikely to uphold the Parliamentary resolution to put an end to these practices.”

By the same token, those with a vested interest in trading in rhino horn and ivory or trophy hunting may unduly influence the deliberations of the panel to secure an outcome on which their direct and/or future revenue depends.

A recent article in Daily Maverick said the apparent duplication of effort and expense “is so extreme, it should warrant investigation by the Auditor-General as possible wasteful and fruitless expenditure”.

It further mentioned that an investigation into the formation of the committee by the Public Protector would be in the public interest.

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