

The sacking of Dion George — how a progressive minister is being taken down by the wildlife breeders



The move to oust the environment minister exposes a deeper hijacking – of the National Elephant Heritage Strategy, of policy integrity and of conservation itself.



This article is an **Analysis**. It goes beyond the basic facts of a news story to provide deeper context, explanation and interpretation. While it may include the author's judgment and expertise, it aims to be more objective.

When South Africa's [National Elephant Heritage Strategy](#) (NEHS) was gazetted this year, it looked like a triumph of inclusive environmental policy – a humane, forward-looking plan to celebrate elephants, not just as wildlife, but as part of our shared cultural and spiritual heritage.

It promised to move the country beyond the exploitative logic of the past, into a new era of coexistence and respect.

But the same progressive vision that made the NEHS such a breakthrough has now placed its strongest defender, Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment Dion George, in the crosshairs. His [potential firing](#) is not just a personnel change – it is the culmination of a campaign by powerful private wildlife interests to recapture the department and reverse two decades of reform.

The story of how the [Elephant Indaba](#) was staged and spliced into the Heritage Strategy is not a sideshow; it's the mechanism of capture itself.

Internationally, his opening statement at the COP30 Leaders' Summit in Belém, Brazil – drawing a hard line against captive breeding, the rhino horn trade and the commodification of wildlife – was both principled and forward-looking, but would have left wildlife breeders seething.

But clarity has made enemies. Pressure to get rid of him has been building behind closed doors. Complaints were filed. "Performance reviews" were whispered. The party line shifted. And then, suddenly, DA leader John Steenhuisen asked President Cyril Ramaphosa to replace him with Willie Aucamp, a long-time ally of the wildlife-ranching and hunting lobby.

Officially, the reason is "underperformance". In reality, the timing reveals the truth: a final workshop to close out the long-delayed Threatened or Protected Species (TOPS) legislation and lion breeding regulations had just been completed – a process intended to finally close the captive lion industry. Days later came the call to remove George. It looks far less like a review than an act of retaliation.

Who stands to gain?

Aucamp's appointment would place the environment portfolio directly in the hands of a man publicly aligned with the wildlife-breeding and hunting industry.

The man touted to replace George is not a neutral referee. Aucamp is a game farmer with a stake in wildlife breeding, aligning his professional base with the very consumptive-use economy now pressing to capture policy. That's not a casual connection; it is a structural conflict.

As Environment Minister, Aucamp would be expected to adjudicate policies that directly affect the profitability of game-breeding and hunting operations – an impossible separation of powers in practice and optics.

He has proudly identified himself with the Sustainable Use Coalition of Southern Africa (SUCo-SA), whose membership includes Wildlife Ranching South Africa, the Confederation of Hunting Associations of South Africa, the National Hunting and Shooting Association, the South African Predators Association, the South African Falconry Association, the South African Taxidermy and Tannery Association and the South African Wingshooters Association.

Collectively, these groups sit at the commercial “use” sector of South African wildlife – from lion breeders and game ranchers, to professional hunters and taxidermists. It’s an ecosystem built on profit from killing or selling animals.



Environment Minister Dion George. (Photo: Parliament)

To install a politician so closely aligned with that coalition would erase the line between regulator and regulated, between conservation and commerce.

If this appointment goes ahead, South Africa’s environmental authority will, for the first time, be run by someone whose personal and political base depends on the commercial exploitation of wildlife. That is not reform. It is capture.

The mechanism of capture was already rehearsed through the Elephant Heritage Strategy. The NEHS was built through wide consultation, drawing together scientists, conservationists, traditional leaders, communities and NGOs. It reflected the vision of the 2023 Biodiversity White Paper and the High-Level Panel on Lions, Elephants, Rhinos and Leopards. Its philosophy was clear: conservation grounded in wellbeing and coexistence, not in extraction and profit.

Yet somewhere between consultation and implementation, the process was hijacked. Without public notice, what is now called the National Elephant Indaba Report was [appended](#) to the NEHS as though it were part of the official strategy. The Indaba, held at Bonamanzi in KwaZulu-Natal in August 2025, had not been part of the participatory process. It was a closed gathering dominated by figures with long histories in trophy hunting and consumptive use.

Its “outcomes” flipped the Heritage Strategy on its head: calling for population reduction, pre-approval of culling “plans”, and a relaxation of legal standards to make killing easier to justify. These additions were never tested through consultation or law. But by attaching them to the NEHS, they acquired the appearance of legitimacy.

When departmental officials presented the Heritage Strategy to Parliament in the first week of November, they slid seamlessly from the NEHS to the Indaba resolutions – even recommending “implementation of the short-term interventions from the Indaba (immediate)”. Most MPs didn’t realise they were being briefed on two entirely separate documents. The bureaucratic sleight of hand was complete.

Stage-managed

Accounts from those present describe the Bonamanzi Indaba as carefully stage-managed. Welfare organisations received minimal notice; only one could attend. Independent scientists were sidelined or confined to virtual sessions. Minutes were selectively circulated and no transcript was released.

Yet its outcomes have since been treated as binding national policy, instructing provinces to approve elephant-culling plans and to apply those “decisions” when considering permits.

In South African administrative law, that is improper and arguably unlawful. Officials are required to apply their minds independently. Embedding a national instruction to approve culls pre-empts that independence and places illegal pressure on provincial authorities.

Deputy Minister Narend Singh has reportedly inserted himself into these technical processes, directing agendas and portraying isolated human-elephant incidents as a national emergency. The pattern is familiar: manufacture a crisis, justify extraordinary measures and clear the path for industry-friendly “solutions”.

What is now circulating in departmental corridors is a plan to downgrade the legally binding Norms and Standards for Elephant Management to non-binding “guidelines”. One word change – “must” to “should” – would remove compliance obligations altogether. Provinces and private reserves would then be free to interpret rules as they please. It is the bureaucratic equivalent of legalising killing by memo.

Manufacturing the narrative

To sell the shift, officials and their allies have leaned heavily on the language of human-elephant conflict: broken fences, ruined crops, frightened villagers. It is an emotionally powerful story – and an effective smokescreen.

The actual data tell another tale. Elephant poaching in South Africa [remains negligible](#). Populations are stable or growing. Most incidents occur where governance has failed – fences left unrepaired, compensation unpaid, land-use unplanned – or when tourists behave recklessly near breeding herds.

By inflating isolated events into a national crisis, the department creates the justification for “urgent intervention” and the political cover to cull. The rhetoric of breeding communities with elephant meat or “creating jobs” through culling and by-product use conceals a web of commercial interests: hunting associations seeking normalisation, provincial departments chasing game-meat or ivory revenue, consultants and outfitters eager for contracts, and politicians seeking rural votes.

It is a system of manufactured emergencies and monetised solutions. And when one minister refused to play along, he was removed.



Willie Aucamp (second from left) with Wildlife Ranching South Africa officials. (Photo: Facebook)

The erosion of trust

The [NEHS](#) was supposed to showcase democratic environmental governance: open, transparent, evidence-based. Instead, it has become a case study in how to weaponise consultation. Stakeholders who made submissions say they have never been told how their input was handled. Parliament questions have repeatedly struggled to extract basic documents such as attendance lists and decision logs. Even the statutory national animal-welfare body, the NSPCA, was excluded.

Once citizens realise that “consultation” is theatre, trust collapses. Communities asked to coexist with elephants will rightly ask: coexist on whose terms, and for whose profit? The damage to institutional credibility is already profound.

Conservation or commerce

The Elephant Indaba was a test case. It showed how easily a small, well-connected lobby can infiltrate a policy process, rewrite its intent and emerge claiming consensus. The proposed appointment of Aucamp would take that test nationally. It would effectively put the same lobby directly in charge of the department.

Aucamp’s close public association with organisations that profit from the killing, breeding and export of wildlife is not incidental; it’s central. As minister, he would be in a position to shape regulations, authorise quotas and influence enforcement – all while standing to gain politically from the same industry.

That is the very definition of departmental capture: when the institution meant to regulate an industry begins to serve it instead.

What is at stake

The original pillars of the Heritage Strategy remain a blueprint worth defending:

Environmental resilience: connected elephant landscapes that sustain biodiversity.

Social cohesion: recognition of elephants’ cultural and spiritual value.

Economic inclusion: equitable benefit-sharing from conservation economies.

This vision is not anti-use; it is anti-exploitation. It insists that elephants are more than their meat, skin or tusks. To turn that into a licence for mass culling is to betray not only the strategy but the very idea of public stewardship.

If the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment still stands by those principles, it must now act transparently: withdraw the unmandated Indaba annexures that were never subjected to public consultation, reaffirm the legal norms and standards for elephant management, and publicly clarify the official version of the Heritage Strategy. Anything less will confirm what many already suspect – that the department has been politically captured and is increasingly serving financial interests.

The lesson of Dion George

This was never just about elephants. It is about the soul of environmental governance in South Africa. George’s removal from the environmental portfolio would be the political expression of the same capture that rewrote the Elephant Strategy. His removal tells every honest official that integrity is dangerous, every scientist that evidence can be overridden and every citizen that policy can be bought.

His departure would not merely be a reshuffle; it is a warning. It signals to industry that resistance will be punished and to the public that the lines between conservation and commerce have all but dissolved.

The elephants will survive another bad cycle of ministers. The question is whether our democracy can survive the loss of integrity that allows this kind of capture to flourish – a system where the minister for the environment may soon also be the minister for monetising wildlife. That is not stewardship. It is the endgame of capture. **DM**

