

**Publication:** Mercury - Main**Reach:** 10610**Title:** Resident describes daily elephant encounters**AVE:** R 19553.29**Publish date:** 30 Oct 2024**Author:** Karen Singh and Siphesihle Buthelezi**Page:** 1

## TUSKERS ON THE LOOSE

# Resident describes daily elephant encounters

KAREN SINGH and SIPHESIHLA BUTHELEZI

A RESIDENT living in a village near KwaCeza in northern KwaZulu-Natal says herdsmen are chased daily by elephants who have been roaming freely in communities ever since they escaped from the Mawana Private Game Reserve several years ago.

While it was reported last week that a herd of about 30 elephants escaped from a private reserve, leaving surrounding villagers fearing for their lives, cattle owner Xolani Msimango, from the Emtshali homestead in Ethaka, said residents have been complaining about elephants leaving the reserve since 2018.

Msimango said he is upset that only now, with the elephants being spotted in KwaCeza, that it had become a big issue, when the wild animals have been tormenting Ethaka residents for years.

He said since 2018, authorities were aware that the voltage of the reserve's fence was low, adding that residents only recently removed part of the fence in anger over the reserve not doing anything about the elephants.

According to Msimango, the incident that happened recently in KwaMpumpula and now in KwaCeza, where people had to leave their homes, was a normal occurrence for them.

"As a member of the community who has cattle, we struggle when we have to take our cattle for grazing. The elephants chase herdsmen on a daily basis."

Msimango added that sometimes he would get home having lost clothing

items while running away from the elephants in the bush; sometimes children encounter elephants on their way home from school, and elephants on the road would block motorists.

Dr Audrey Delsink, senior wildlife director for Humane Society International/Africa, said the elephants have been roaming freely for several years due to fence deterioration, reportedly caused by poaching and theft, followed by apparent inadequate maintenance at the Mawana Game Reserve.

"As a result, the elephants have established a home range both within and around the Mawana Game Reserve and its surrounding areas," she said.

The non-governmental organisation (NGO), which assisted in pushing the herd into the bush, said one of the adult bulls killed Beyers Coetzee in 2020 while he was attempting to chase them away from the community. The elephant was destroyed two years later.

Delsink said that this year, a cattle herder, Mr Buthelezi, was severely injured by an elephant whilst tending to his cattle. She said the incidents reiterated the importance of having humane, non-lethal programmes in place to mitigate human-elephant conflict and avoid harm to both people and animals.

In May 2024, Humane Society International/Africa and Elephants Alive submitted proposals to Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZNW) recommending the installation of a temporary fence to contain the elephants at the reserve, while devising efforts for a permanent fence.

"However, feedback, discussion, and approval from Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife on the proposals has not been forthcoming."

Delsink said the matter should have been addressed when the proposals were first submitted.

She said the authority has now arranged to have a meeting with the NGO groups towards the end of November.

"We hope for an open, collaborative, and transparent discussion that will craft a viable solution based on prior proposals and constructive dialogue," said Delsink.

With regard to the elephant population, Ezemvelo said Africa, in general, has a problem with elephants.

"We no longer have enough land that can accommodate them. In KZN, they are overpopulated, and there is insufficient space to keep them."

Ezemvelo also said that a compliance notice was issued to the reserve for a number of issues.

In reaction to residents wanting the elephants to be removed, either dead or alive, Delsink said it was understandable that the community was seeking a resolution to the situation.

"The Mawana landscape is extremely complex due to the terrain, land ownership, elephant ownership, and multiple stakeholders involved. However, all possible solutions must follow due legislative processes under the National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act and the Norms and Standards of Elephant Management in South Africa as per the provincial regulatory authority (which is EKZNW)," she said.