

KZN game reserves hit by massive budget cuts

By [Katharine Child](#)

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The operational budgets of state-run game reserves in KwaZulu-Natal are facing a 40% cut, which conservationists say will affect anti-poaching efforts, biodiversity, tourism and the running of game parks.



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Some game parks told *The Times* they learned of the cuts last week and are worried about running the parks, maintaining conservation efforts and fighting poaching as even petrol for patrol cars would be rationed.

The overall budget has not been cut but the operational aspect has been reduced, confirmed KZN Ezemvelo spokesman Musa Mntambo. The cuts are leading to frozen posts at game reserves, in rural areas already short of employment opportunities.

KZN Ezemvelo runs large parks such as Hluhluwe Imfolozi Park - the oldest reserve in Africa - Giants Castle in the Drakensberg, and Tembe Elephant Park, Mkuze Game Reserve and Ndumo Game Reserve, all in northern KwaZulu-Natal. It also runs the St Lucia and iSimangaliso Wetlands parks.

"In terms of operational expenditure, the entity faces a cut of R59m, a 39% decline on the prior year's budget," he said.

He said that there would not be retrenchments. He did not answer questions as to why the operational budget had been cut

when the overall budget had risen by 15%.

Mntambo added: "We are concerned by the huge cut in our operating budget. However, the budget we have shall be able to pay for our limited operations."

The Democratic Alliance has criticised the province for failing to enact the strategy it had committed to last year, of hiring out land and hotels to private operators.

DA spokesman in KwaZulu-Natal Francois Rodgers said the commercialisation of hospitality sectors within the entity would allow Ezemvelo to focus on environmental management.

Sanparks, which manages the Kruger Park, gets 18% of its budget from the state and gets the rest of its money from using "concessions" in which private operators pay for land to run hotels or activities such as Table Mountain's cable car.

Chairman of the Game Rangers' Association of Africa Chris Galliers said: "The problem is that the percentage of the overall budget is too heavily weighted towards salaries with not enough remaining for operational expenses."

He said declining budgets "will also affect morale of staff who are increasingly being constrained in their ability to carry out the job that they are trained and employed to do".

He said the cuts would affect tourism, the tourist experience and scientific management of biodiversity in the parks.

Mark Gerrard, strategic manager at Wildlife Conservation Trust, said this meant private-public partnerships were essential. "It is for this reason that Project Rhino KZN was established, developing an effective partnership to support both state, private and community owned reserves as they face increasing pressure."

Mntambo said anti-poaching activities would not be affected.

"It must be noted that anti-poaching is of national interest and includes other agencies such as SA Police Service, the SA National Defence Force and NGOs that utilise their own funding."

Source: The Times

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