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Honourable Minister Barbara Creecy

Minister of Fisheries, Forestry and Environment

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24 May 2021

OPEN LETTER

Trophy Hunting of Leopards

Dear Honourable Minister Creecy

Exquisitely beautiful and elusive, leopards unsurprisingly form part of South Africa's so-called iconic 'Big Five', yet their current conservation status is a population in persistent decline¹ and, alarmingly, they are extinct in 67% of South Africa. Most of leopard distribution falls outside of formally protected areas and is highly fragmented by both agriculture and urban development². Conserving and protecting leopards successfully requires us to track population numbers and trends, however, properly monitoring leopards is difficult because of their elusiveness and because they occur at low densities.

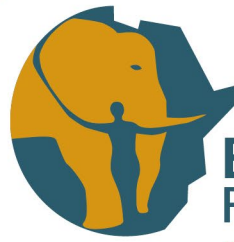
There is increasing evidence showing that most leopard populations across southern Africa are threatened by exploitation. According to peer-reviewed research papers human-mediated leopard mortality is widespread, especially amongst private agricultural and wildlife ranches in South Africa. Climate change, trophy hunting, illegal hunting, killing for skins, 'legal destruction', revenge killings, by-catch from snares for the bush meat trade and lack of adequate protection from government, are pushing leopards in South Africa to the brink of extinction. Moreover, unreported and illegal killing of wildlife is widespread across southern Africa and therefore also extremely pertinent. All of these threats contribute to the overall decline in leopard numbers.

Peer-reviewed research published in 2020³, which explored the long-term genetic costs of these exploitation-driven changes in the behaviour of leopards, found overwhelming evidence that exploitation is disrupting the dispersal behaviour of leopards, ultimately leading to inbreeding. Reduced genetic diversity exposes populations to the challenges of future disturbances, including disease outbreak, habitat loss and climate change. This unsustainable exploitation of leopards will have severe ecological and evolutionary costs. Changing the social dynamics of individual behaviour and removing individuals, especially of a particular age or sex, destabilises leopard populations.

¹ Department of Environment Submission to CITES, 2018.

² Jacobson AP, Gerngross P, Lemeris Jr. JR, Schoonover RF, Anco C, Breitenmoser-Würsten C, Durant SM, Farhadinia MS, Henschel P, Kamler JF, Laguardia A, Rostro-García S, Stein AB, Dollar L. 2016. Leopard (*Panthera pardus*) status, distribution, and the research efforts across its range. PeerJ 4:e1974 <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.1974>

³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ece3.6089>



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Biologists who have studied leopards agree that the proposed age of seven years to hunt leopard does not take into account later studies showing high mortality due to infanticide.⁴ The levels of infanticide would be higher in areas where the males in their prime are continuously removed by hunters. Trophy hunters have proven to be particularly poor at ageing and sexing leopards and have also proven to be untrustworthy in terms of declaring if females were shot and have also admitted their willingness to shoot females even if this is illegal. Even moderate levels of hunting have been proven to be detrimental to leopards.

Despite all of the above, at CITES, astoundingly, South Africa defended the setting of the annual quota for the trophy hunting of leopards in South Africa at 150 leopards per annum.

The EMS Foundation, therefore, remains deeply concerned about the status and protection of leopards in South Africa and questions the decision-making processes involved with the of determination of trophy hunting quotas.

On 16th January 2017 your Department confirmed that the zero quota for leopard hunting had been extended for the year based on the review of available scientific information on the status and recovery of the leopard populations in South Africa.⁵ However, less than a month later, on the 8th of February 2017, your Department for the Environment placed a notice in the Government Gazette (No. 40601) entitled *Draft Norms and Standards for the Management and Monitoring of the Hunting of Leopard in South Africa for Trophy Hunting Purposes*. In 2018, the Minister allocated a leopard hunting quota.⁶

On the 18th of June 2019 members of the *Wildlife Animal Protection Forum South Africa* (WAPFSA) sent in a offered a submission to your Department with regard to the determination of leopard trophy hunting for 2019. WAPFSA recommended a zero quota and called for the cessation of the issuance of leopard trophy permits based on the available science and the deficiencies of the regulatory environmental and consultative processes that were currently in place in the determination of leopard population viability and the status of the leopard species.⁷ In 2019 no hunting quota was allocated but in 2020 a hunting quota was.

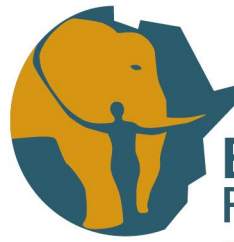
On the 23rd of February 2021 the EMS Foundation requested information from SANBI in terms of the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA). We requested information on what the actual leopard quota was in 2020—i.e. how many leopards were actually killed and on what scientific basis had the quota been established. We also asked SANBI if the 2021 leopard trophy hunting quota had been established and if so, how this was established. In relation to these requests, on the 18th of March 2021, SANBI responded by suggesting that we direct our requests to the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries as they did not have this information. SANBI confirmed in their response that the Scientific Authority provides scientific advice to the Minister for her consideration.

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264372139_Why_leopards_commit_infanticide

⁵ <https://capeleopard.org.za/news-media/archive/story/dea-extends-ban-on-leopard-hunting-in-south-africa-for-2017>

⁶ https://www.environment.gov.za/mediarelease/molewa_allocatesleopard_quota

⁷ <https://wapfsa.org/category/protection-of-leopards/>



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We also requested the names of the members of the Scientific Steering Committee for Leopard Monitoring that provide the information required by the Scientific Authority but unfathomably this information was refused.

On the 22nd April 2021, the EMS Foundation, thus duly followed process and requested from DFFE, via PAIA, access to all records related to leopard hunting in South Africa in 2020. The DFFE responded to the PAIA on the 13th of May 2021. The Deputy Director General of DFFE stated that this department is not in possession or control of the records relating to leopard hunting in South Africa. Furthermore, the DDG stated that these records are not the responsibility of the department but suggested that these records may be in the possession or under the control of the nine Provincial Conservation Authorities.

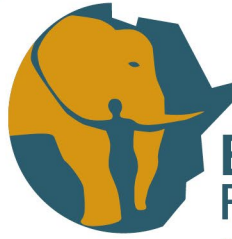
The purpose of the PAIA is to ensure that people can exercise their constitutional right of access to information held by the State and other public bodies. This Act was brought about to foster a culture of transparency and accountability in public service and is meant to enable South Africans to fully exercise and protect their rights. However, there seems to be an underlying intention to manipulate PAIA provisions in a bid to undermine its application.⁸

The EMS Foundation would like to determine on what scientific basis and data the decisions are being made by the Minister to determine a trophy hunting quota. Technically the Scientific Authority (in practice SANBI) does the Non-Detrimental Findings (NDFs). SANBI is also (in terms of TOPS) responsible for determining annual hunting off-takes for TOPS which are then published by the Minister. Surely, therefore, SANBI must have gathered information from the provinces about what was hunted and where as it could not determine the new quota without this information. Moreover, according to item 72 of the TOPS Regulations:

72. Setting of annual hunting off-take limits.—SANBI must each year before the end of September determine for the following year, annual hunting off-take limits for the country as a whole and per province in respect of a listed threatened or protected animal species determined by the Minister. Clearly SANBI is not complying with Reg 72 if the consultation process for the for the 2021 quota has not even started.

Your Department is responsible for initiating the consultation process for the 2021 leopard quota. If that is the case, how can they do this without the information we requested from SANBI which SANBI says it does not have? The EMS Foundation is extremely concerned that, when it comes to leopards in South Africa, neither SANBI or DFFE are able to provide information they should have at their fingertips – facts, material and evidence that should not only inform their leopard population assessment for 2021 (on which the trophy hunting quota is determined) but should also be the basis for government public engagement on this issue.

⁸ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-10-04-theres-many-an-obstacle-in-exercising-our-right-of-access-to-information/>



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Finally, SANBI's current NDF for leopard hunting and trade was made contingent on the leopard hunting Norms and Standards being implemented, however these norms and standards were never finalised. Clearly this means that trade and trophy hunting pose a high risk to leopard, and a zero quota must be set.

We look forward to your earliest response.

Kind Regards

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