

by Kevin Crowley

# Ranchers may overstate South Africa animal numbers

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South African privately owned wildlife farms may be using inflated numbers of animal populations in their care, according to a study by the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) funded by the Development Bank of South Africa.

According to EWT there are about 6 million herbivores on private farms. Until now, academic literature assumed there were between 16 million and 20 million animals on the ranches. Wouter van Hoven, an emeritus professor at the University of Pretoria who estimated the higher number, said by phone his research refers to all animals in South Africa, including those in national reserves and not just on ranches. Wildlife Ranching South Africa will publish a response later, Chief Executive Officer Adri Kitshoff said by phone.

“It is impossible to assess the true extent of wildlife ranching in South Africa,” researchers led by EWT’s Andrew Taylor said in the report. “This makes it difficult to determine the accuracy of many statements made by stakeholders in the industry, many of which, in our opinion, use inflated figures.”

Hunters and ranchers who breed wild animals often cite the rapid growth in animal numbers since the 1960s as justification for their activities and argue that they help boost biodiversity and conservation. In addition to hunting, those activities include game viewing and breeding animals for auctions.

The 6 million wild animals in private ranches is still a large rise from the 575,000 large mammals living in South Africa in the early 1960s estimated by Van Hoven. Wildlife ranching is still a “major contributor to the economy, job creation and biodiversity conservation,” EWT said. The ranches are “closer to what would be considered natural” than livestock and crop farms, which they are often converted from, benefiting the environment, it said.

The study expressed concern that some farms may be having a negative impact, stating “the degree to which wildlife ranches put up fences to secure their animals, and the increasing level of intensification that appears to be taking place due to the growth of the breeding of high value species and color variants, must be having a detrimental impact on biodiversity”.

There are 8,979 private wildlife ranches in South Africa covering 170,419 km<sup>2</sup> EWT said in the study. Hunting generates about 2.6 billion rand (\$164 million) in revenue a year, while auctions make 4.3 billion rand and meat production earns about 600 million rand. About 65,000 people work in the industry earning a median salary of 3,441 rand a month.

**Editor’s Note:** Read the 16th February Press Release of the Endangered Wildlife Trust THE ROLE OF

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Taylor, W.A., Lindsey, P.A. & Davies-Mostert, H. 2015. The Endangered Wildlife Trust, Johannesburg.