



# BRING THE ELEPHANT HOME

**Dr. Antoinette van de Water**  
**Marieke Boogaard**



# Bring The Elephant Home

**Vision:** Meaningful coexistence between elephants and people

**Mission:** To increase the chances of survival for elephants and work towards a world in which people and elephants can thrive together, benefiting from each other's existence.

**Strategy:**

- Applying an empowering, community-based **'living in harmony'** conservation approach
- Integrating the intrinsic, ecological, economic, cultural, social, and spiritual values of nature/elephants in conservation strategies.
- Transforming elephant-human-environmental relationships through applying a One Well-being approach, i.e. conservation solutions that provide mutual benefits for people, elephants, and the environment.



## Definition protectionist conservation:

*“Fortress, or protectionist, conservation excludes people from conservation areas, assuming that local people use natural resources in destructive ways, and as a result cause biodiversity loss and environmental degradation.”*

## Definition convivial conservation:

*“Convivial (literally: ‘living with’) goes beyond traditional conservation models, seeking to integrate different value systems, and promoting social and ecological justice for all.”*



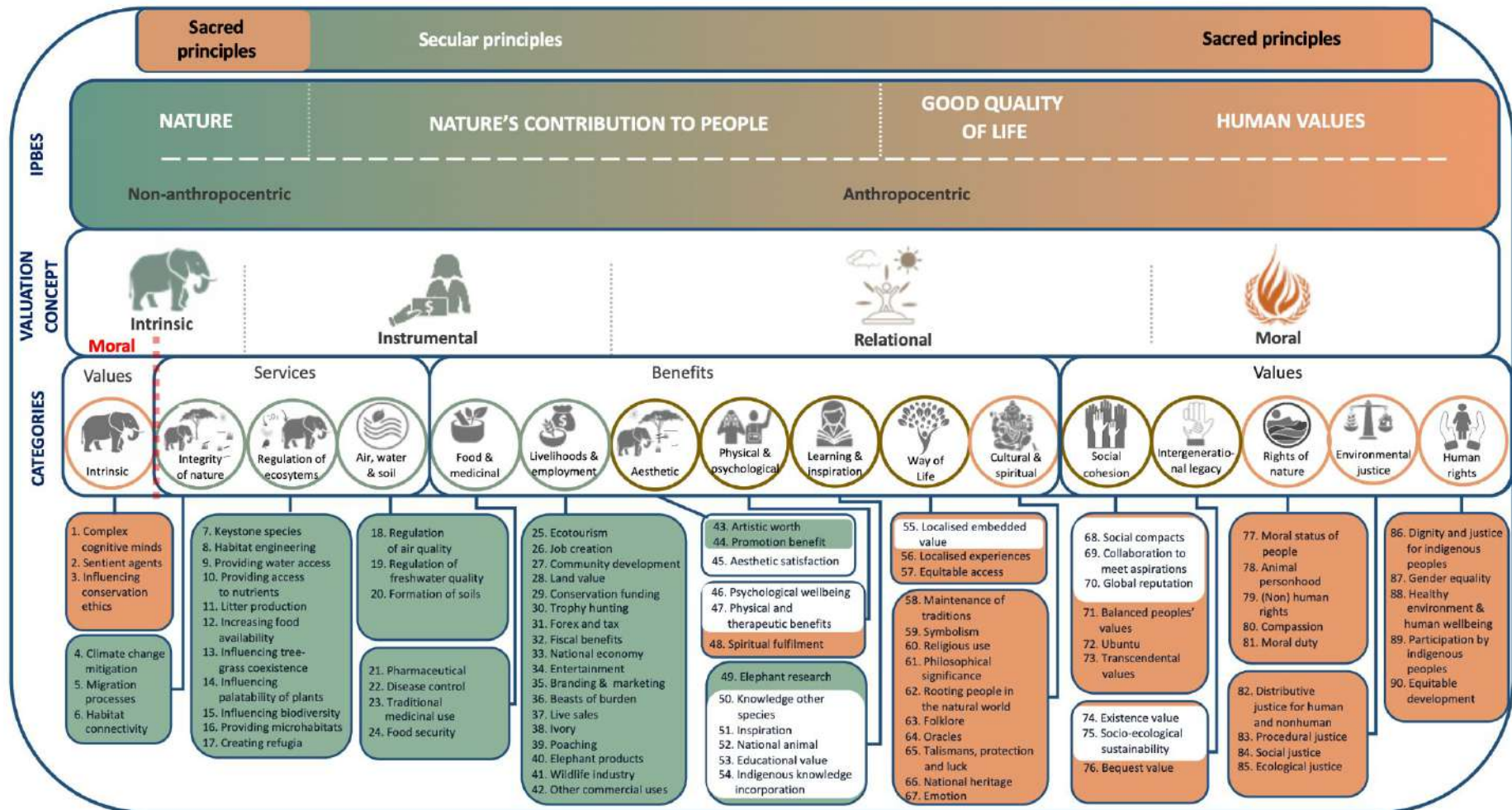


# The value of elephants

Van de Water, A., Henley, M. D., Bates, L., & Slotow, R. (2022).

The value of elephants: A pluralistic approach. *Ecosystem Services*, 58(101488).





# One Well-being approach

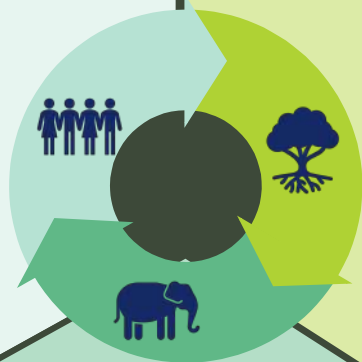
Conservation solutions that provide mutual benefits for people, elephants, and the environment.

## Human well-being

E.g. When local people have a say in conservation decision and benefit from protected areas, they are less likely to engage in wildlife crime activities, such as poaching. Local engagement in conservation opens up opportunities to create community-owned reserves, thereby contributing to biodiversity goals.

## Environmental well-being

E.g. States have an obligation to protect people's right to a healthy environment, which is expressed in over 100 constitutions (Boyd, 2018; Menton et al., 2020), because a healthy environment supports human well-being. Protecting, restoring and rewilding land supports animal well-being.



E.g. When elephant well-being is considered, elephants will less likely be aggressive, reducing management costs, risks to human life and public outcries and potential reputational damage and division. By protecting elephants, we protect their habitat and many other species.

## Elephant well-being



## HIGH AMBITION COALITION

FOR NATURE AND PEOPLE

100+ governments from six continents have committed to protecting at least 30% of land by 2030, through a transformative approach that strengthens local economies and livelihoods, heeds the wisdom of indigenous peoples, and takes into consideration the needs of future generations.



forestry, fisheries  
& the environment

Department:  
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

The White Paper on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of South Africa's Biodiversity (Government Gazette, 2023) emphasises the need for an African conservation approach that aims to conserve and sustain biodiversity, while ensuring access and benefits for local people, embracing the values of diversity, indigenous knowledge, and moral principles such as those encapsulated in the African philosophy of Ubuntu.



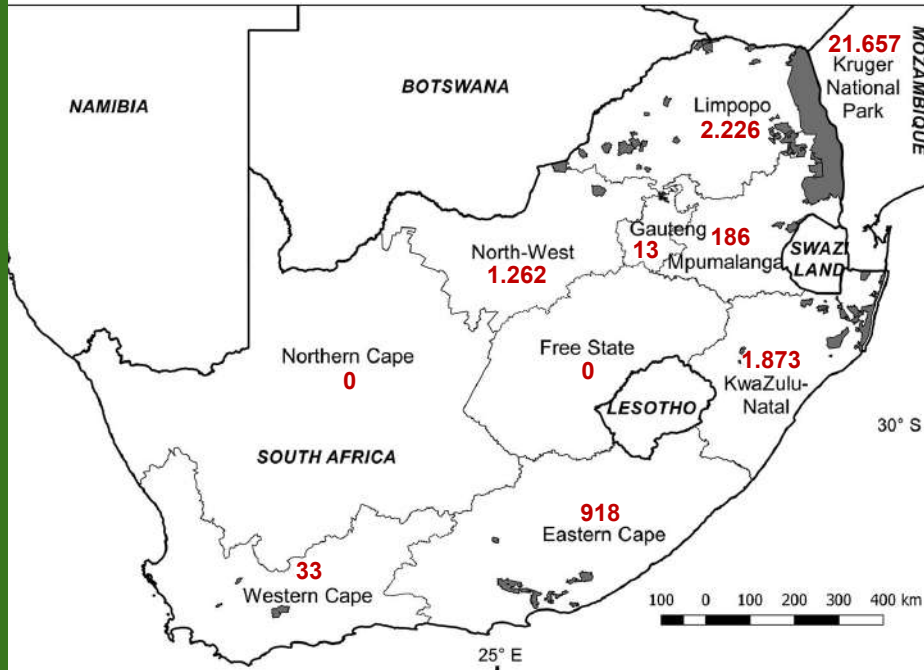
**South Africa** is considered one of the most **biodiversity-rich**, but also one of the most **socio-economically unequal** countries.

## African Savanna elephant (*Loxodonta africana*)

Conservation status:  
**Endangered**

Population in Africa:  
**415,428 (Decreasing)**  
Population in SA (SANBI, 2022):  
43,884 to 44,775 elephants:  
State PAs: 33,760 to 34,651  
Contractual PAS: 4,156s  
Communal: 64  
Private: 5,904)  
**(Increasing)**

Nr. of national parks with  
wild elephants: **78**  
=> 77% have populations of  
< 100 elephants (genetically  
non-viable)



## ISSUES

Conservation authorities:

Manage according to a protectionist approach, providing inadequate access and benefits for communities.

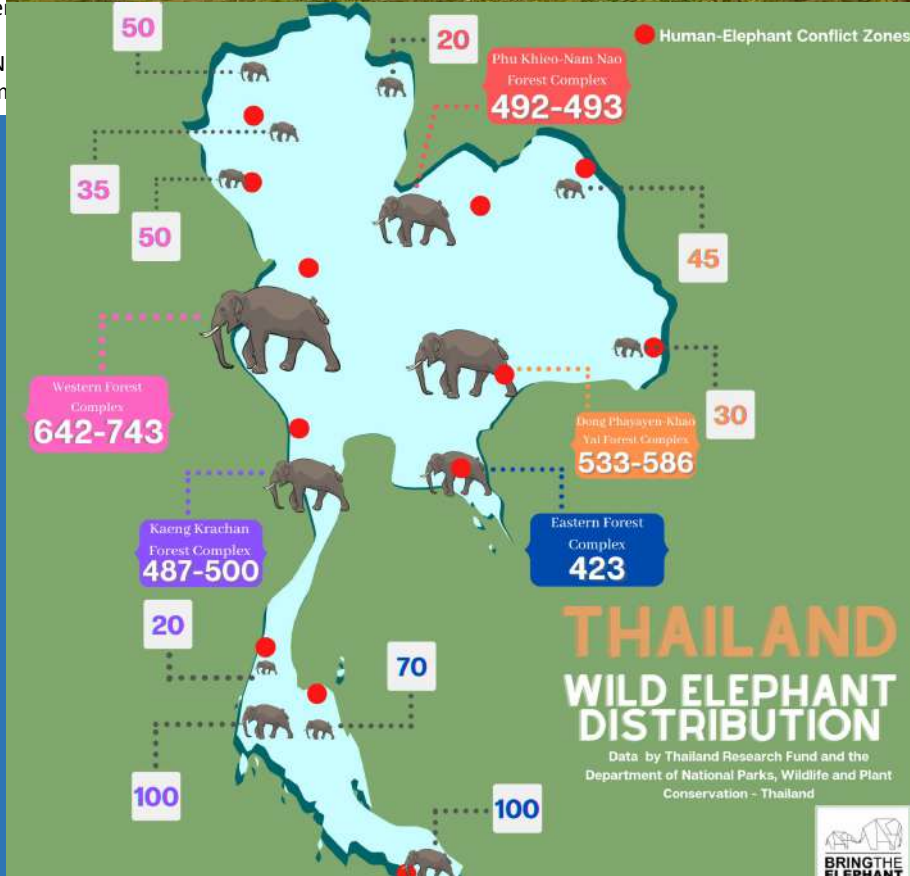
- Inequality: some people lose access to protected areas while others don't.
- Reduced social cohesion
- Increased poaching: every 15 minutes an elephant is killed in Africa.
- Increased environmental degradation
- Decreased genetic variation and connectivity due to fences

New ways to protect are needed:

- Restore and rewild more land
- Ensure fair access and benefit-sharing
- Align with national and global aspirations



Antoinette van de Water  
School of Life Sciences  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Bring The Elephant Home



## ISSUES

### Conservation authorities:

Ignore and repress towards Inform and consult  
But co-management is still scarce in Asia.

(Parr et al., 2008)

- No standardized requirements of management plans or formalized policy statements for protected area management.
- Lack of stakeholder involvement in management planning processes.
- Lack of recommendations for action and gap between strategic planning vs on the ground decision-making and practice.
- Societal needs are not incorporated in policy development.
- Human-elephant conflicts are widespread and increasing.



## Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*)

Conservation status:  
**Endangered**

Population wild elephants in  
Thailand:  
**3,000- 3,500 (Stable)**

Nr. of protected areas with  
wild elephants: 69

Protected areas where  
Human-elephant conflicts  
occur: 41

An increasing number of  
elephants now use  
human-dominated  
landscapes.

# Thailand

Unintended consequences of protectionist conservation in Thailand:

- Loss of access when the National Park was created
- Agriculture turned intensive:
  - Large-scale
  - Export-orientated
- Communities lost their independence
- Increased human-elephant conflicts





# Human-elephant conflicts in Thailand





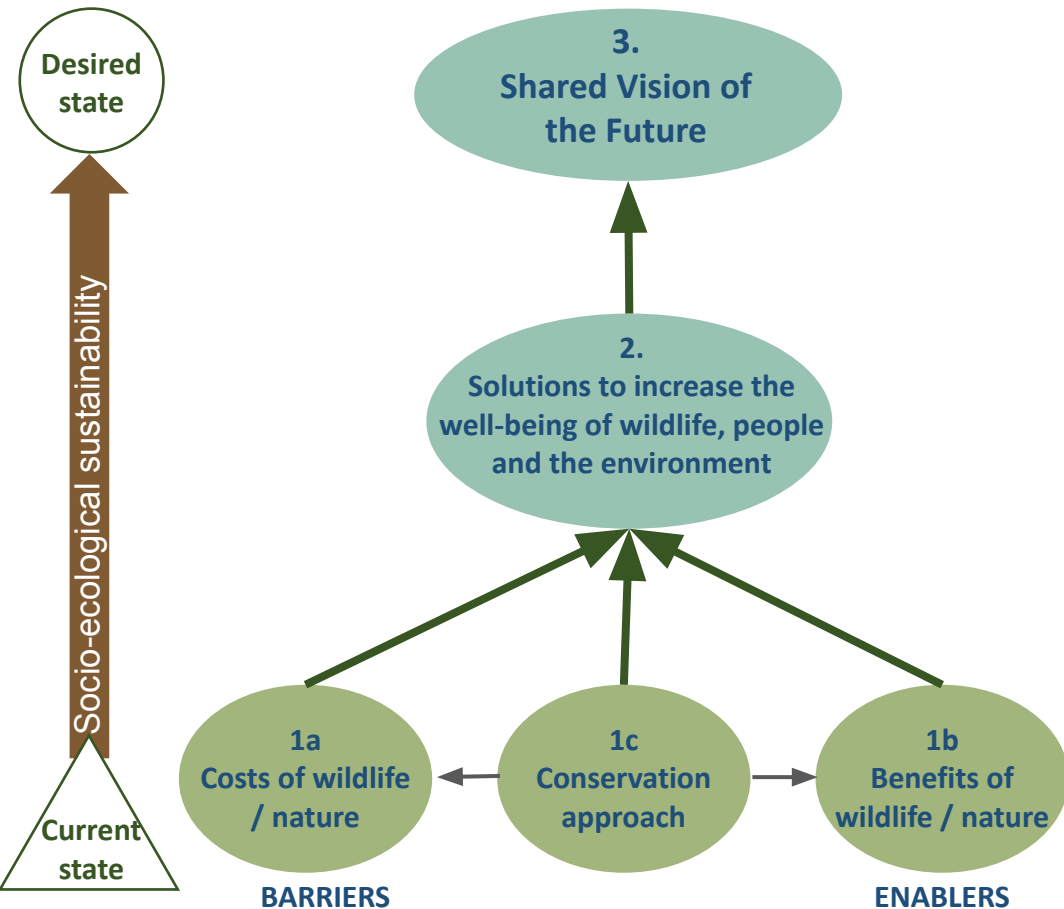
The way forward

Society

# Transformative, inclusive conservation



# A THEORY OF CHANGE FOR LIVING IN HARMONY



## Today's inspiration session

Goal: evaluating the coexistence between humans and wildlife/nature in the landscape you work in and gain meaningful insights for improving coexistence.

# Let's start: Participatory Action Research

## Poster 1a and 1b: Current state

- How does nature impact local people and society at large? I.e:
  - what are the costs (1a) & benefits (1b) and who experiences those?
  - What conservation approach is applied (e.g. viewing people as part of or separate from nature, fortress (fences & fines) vs convivial conservation (no fences & access to local people), intense management or laissez-faire)

## Poster 2: Solutions

- What measures need to be taken to realise socio-ecological sustainability, increase tolerance towards wildlife and enable people and wildlife live together in harmony?
- How do these solutions impact the well-being of wildlife, people and the environment?

## Poster 3: Vision

- What does an ideal future of living in harmony look like?





For a world where people,  
elephants and nature thrives.

# Thank you!