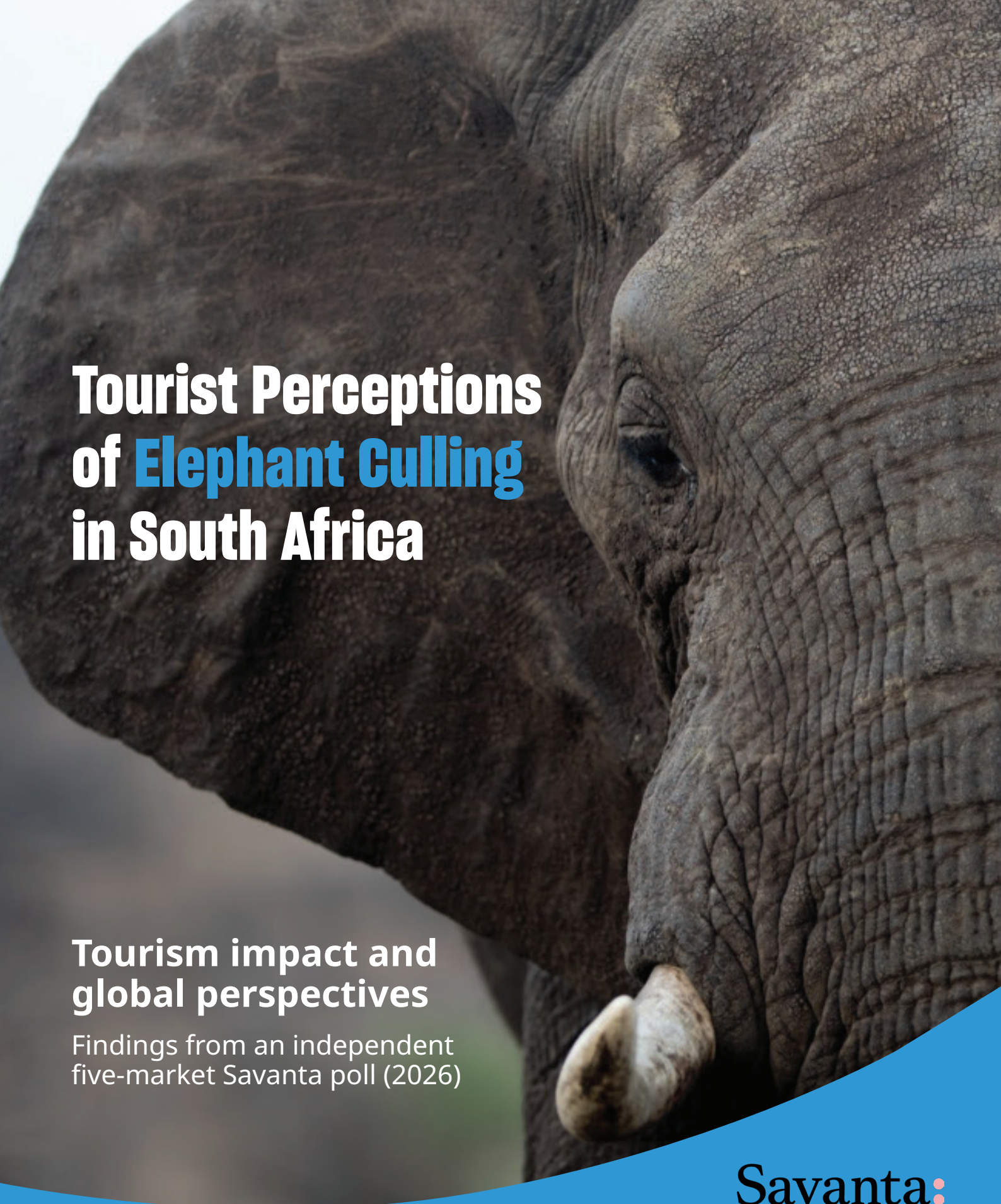




Tourist Perceptions of **Elephant Culling** in South Africa

Tourism impact and global perspectives

Findings from an independent
five-market Savanta poll (2026)

Commissioned by Humane World for
Animals South Africa

Prepared by Dr. Audrey Delsink and Dr. Matthew Schurch

August 2026

Savanta:



**Humane
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Formerly called
Humane Society International

Executive Summary

South Africa's elephant management policy is being revised amid renewed calls for culling, ranging from large-scale to lower-intensity interventions intended to alter fecundity or elephant behaviour through range use. These proposals have generated significant debate, including within international tourism markets. The survey therefore provides timely evidence on public trust, reputational risk and social acceptability—factors central to policy commitments on good governance, duty of care, transformation and inclusive decision-making.

Humane World for Animals commissioned Savanta, an independent market research company, to assess how elephant culling may affect perceptions of South Africa as a tourism destination and to test public support for lethal elephant management. The research speaks directly to South Africa's evolving biodiversity policy framework, including the White Paper on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of South Africa's Biodiversity, the High-Level Panel report on elephant, lion, leopard and rhinoceros management, the Policy position on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of elephant, lion, leopard and rhinoceros and the National Elephant Heritage Strategy. These frameworks call for evidence-based, socially-legitimate, ecologically-sustainable and welfare-conscious decisions in line with our overarching environmental legislation that safeguard biodiversity while supporting people, livelihoods and the wildlife economy.

Tourism accounts for 9% of South Africa's Gross Domestic Product¹, or 1.5 to 1.8 million direct and indirect jobs which is about one in every 12 to 18 workers². This makes tourism a major labour-absorbing cushion against South Africa's high unemployment rate through its high demand for entry-level and service staff. Multi-market public opinion evidence is thus critical to the policy debate. Official arrivals data show that South Africa recorded 4,220,586 international tourist arrivals between January and May 2026, a 12.8% year-on-year increase, with the United States and United Kingdom among the leading overseas source markets in May 2026³. The Savanta survey covered respondents from the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and the Netherlands—the top four markets highly relevant to South Africa's nature-based tourism economy.

The findings show strong concern about elephant culling and suggest that such policies could weaken South Africa's destination appeal, international reputation and wildlife economy, with 47% of respondents (increasing per individual country) reporting that they would be less likely to visit South Africa if it were to adopt culling. Respondents linked elephant welfare and conservation standards to South Africa's ethical standing and credibility as a global wildlife destination.

Across domestic and international audiences, respondents clearly favoured non-lethal elephant management options. 81% of South African respondents agree that our country's reputation as a conservation leader would be damaged if culling was to be reinstated as a primary option. Range expansion, wildlife corridors, water-source management and immunocontraception were preferred over no active intervention and culling, with culling consistently ranked lowest at only 5% support. This supports the National Elephant Heritage Strategy's combined socio-ecological approach, which frames elephants as part of living landscapes and calls for adaptive management and stakeholder engagement. However, the Strategy also presents a policy conundrum by positioning elephants as conduits for utilisation through both culling and tourism, while the survey suggests these objectives are misaligned: culling may erode the public trust, destination appeal and tourism value that elephant-based utilisation is intended to generate.

Across both audiences, large-scale elephant culling carries a demonstrable and directional risk to South Africa's tourism revenue and conservation reputation. Non-lethal options, last-resort commitments, transparency and public consultation are the most effective mitigators of concern. Decisions should account for ecological outcomes, animal welfare, community and stakeholder legitimacy, tourism competitiveness and South Africa's long-term conservation brand. The results strengthen the case for prioritising welfare-oriented, non-lethal solutions that protect elephants, sustain ecological integrity and maintain South Africa's standing as a responsible wildlife destination.

*Audrey Delsink, DPhil, Pr.Nat.Sci.
Senior Director, Wildlife
Humane World for Animals South Africa*

¹ South Africa tourism GDP hits 9%, targets 10.3% growth

² Tourism a driver of economy and jobs | SAnews

³ International tourism arrivals climb 12.8% as SA eyes new market

It is acknowledged that the conservation of wild animals and their well-being are intertwined values, and, where relevant, decisions need to take this into account. In this regard, the well-being of individual and populations of wild animals needs to be integrated into biodiversity policy and legislation, as well as conservation and sustainable practices.

South Africa's Biodiversity, 2023: Publication of the White Paper on Conservation and Sustainable use of South Africa's Biodiversity

47%

International tourists would be less likely to visit South Africa if culling was reinstated

80%

Agree that non-lethal should be prioritised over lethal alternatives where possible

77%

South Africans believe tourism would suffer

81%

South Africans believe conservation reputation would be damaged





Respondents
surveyed

5,027

across 5 markets

South Africa

USA

UK

Germany

Netherlands

Fieldwork: 2026 | Weighted to be nationally representative · 95% significance level

Study Objective

Quantifying the tourism cost of large-scale elephant culling

Following Savanta's earlier poll on captive lion breeding (commissioned by World Animal Protection and Blood Lions in March 2026), Humane World for Animals commissioned this follow-up study to test how a large-scale elephant-culling policy in South Africa would be perceived by both **South African residents** and **international** source-market **tourists**.

Why this matters

Tourism contributes ~9% of South Africa's GDP. The study aims to generate statistically representative evidence to inform opposition to the reinstating of mass-culling policies and to characterise the potential reputational and behavioural response of both audiences.

Primary Research Questions



Do international tourists' stated intentions to visit South Africa change if culling is introduced?



How do South African residents view large-scale culling and its implications for tourism and conservation reputation?



Which management safeguards would most reduce public concern if culling were used?

Methodology

An independent online survey conducted across five key tourism markets to understand perceptions of elephant culling in South Africa.

5,027
respondents

≈1,000
per market

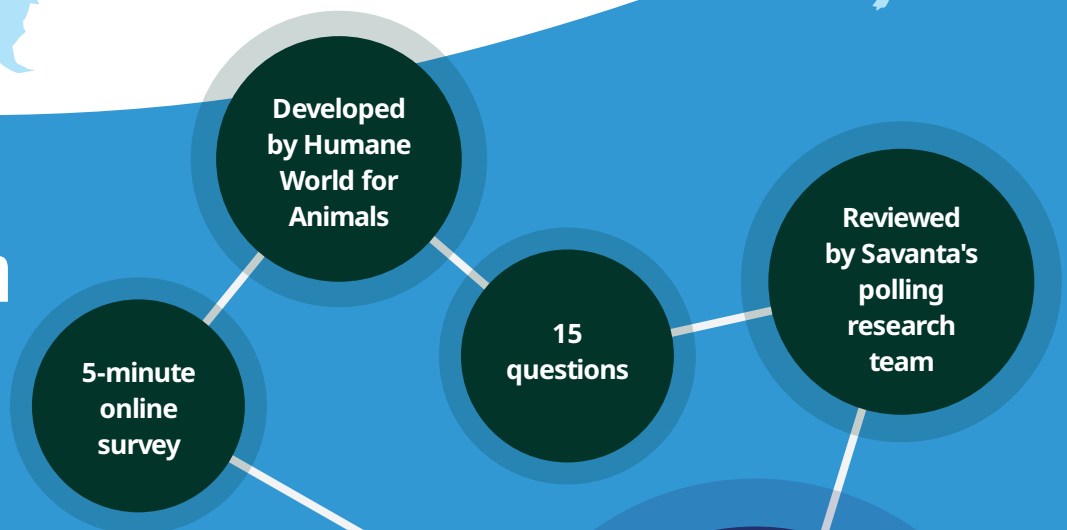
Sample by market



Quotas based on age, gender and region.

Post-stratification weighting applied where required.

Survey Design



Analysis

- Results weighted to reflect each market
- Statistical significance tested at the 95% confidence level

Eligibility

South Africa:
all adults (18+).

International markets:
adults who visited South Africa in the past three years or would consider visiting for leisure.

Sample Composition International Markets

**n
=
4,022**

Age and gender distribution of respondents who visited SA in the past three years or would consider it for future leisure travel. Weighted to national population estimates.

Age distribution by market (weighted %)

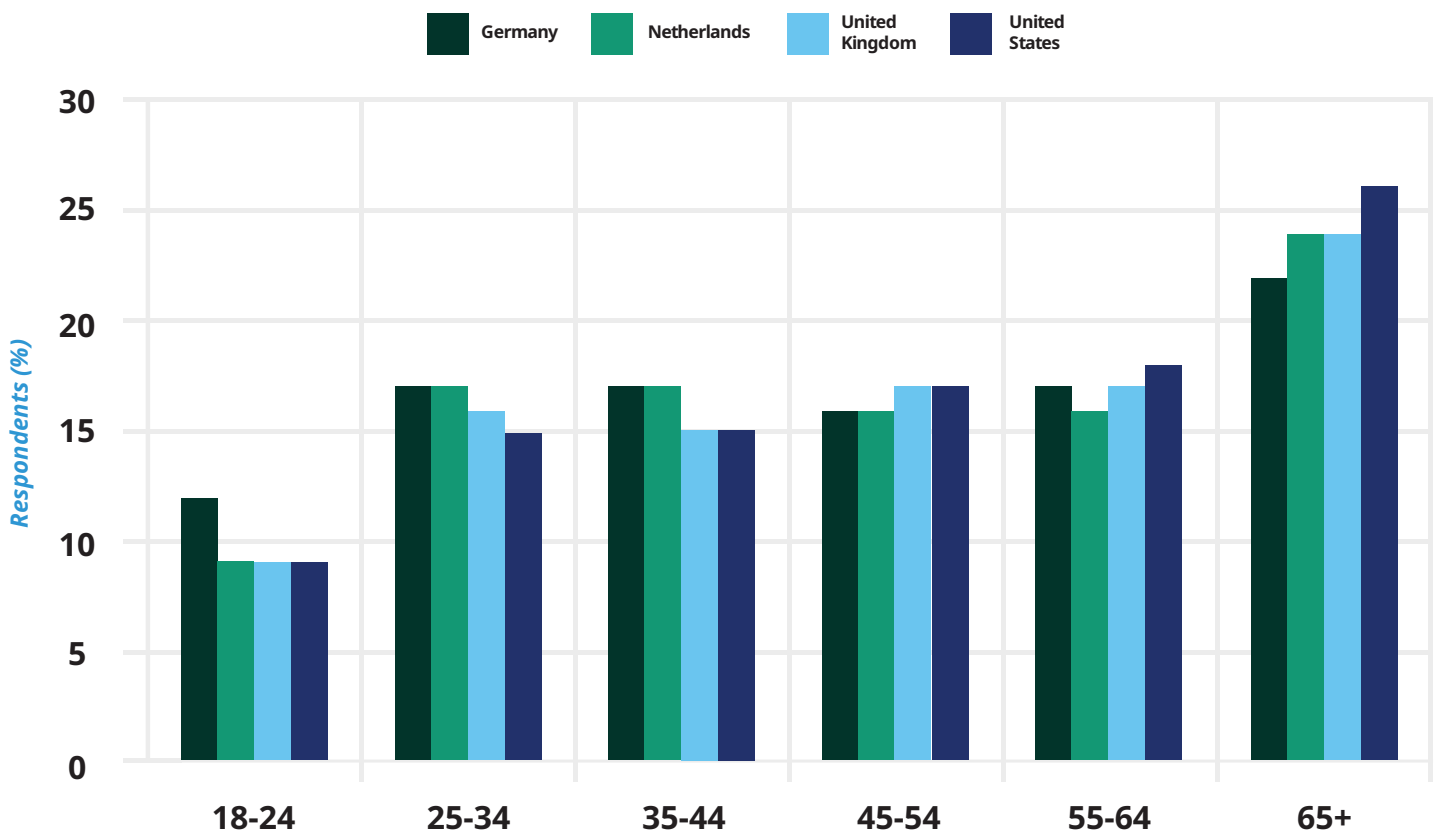
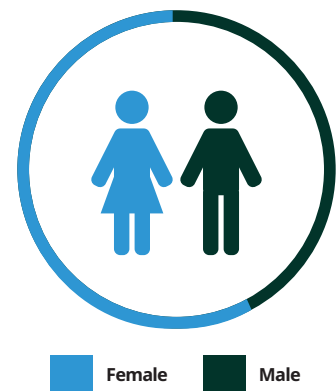


Fig 1: Age distribution

Gender (international total)

- Sample skews older: 55+ = 43% of international respondents, consistent with the higher long-haul travel propensity of these age bands.
- Germany, NL and UK have very similar age profiles; the US skews slightly younger.
- Gender balance is close to 50/50 in every market.



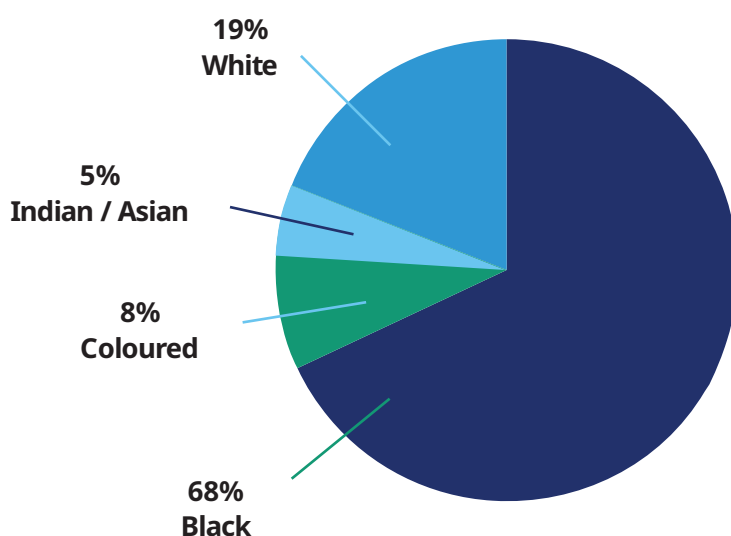
Sample Composition

South Africa

n
=
1,005

Population group and age distribution of the South African adult sample, weighted to national estimates.

Population group (weighted %)



- SA sample skews younger than the international samples (47% aged 18-34 vs 27% internationally), reflecting SA's actual population age structure.
- Population-group proportions are weighted to national estimates, allowing sub-group analysis across Black, Coloured, Indian/Asian and White respondents.

Fig 2: South African population group respondents

Age distributio South Africa (weighted %)

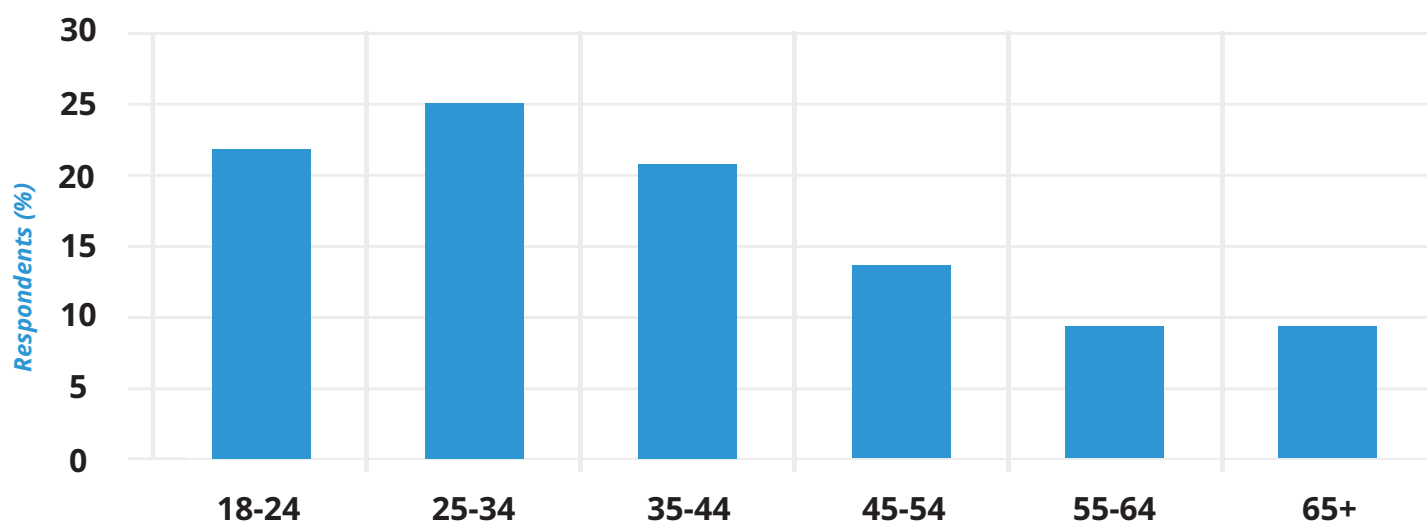


Fig 3: South African age distribution

Findings: Views on culling and the impact on tourism

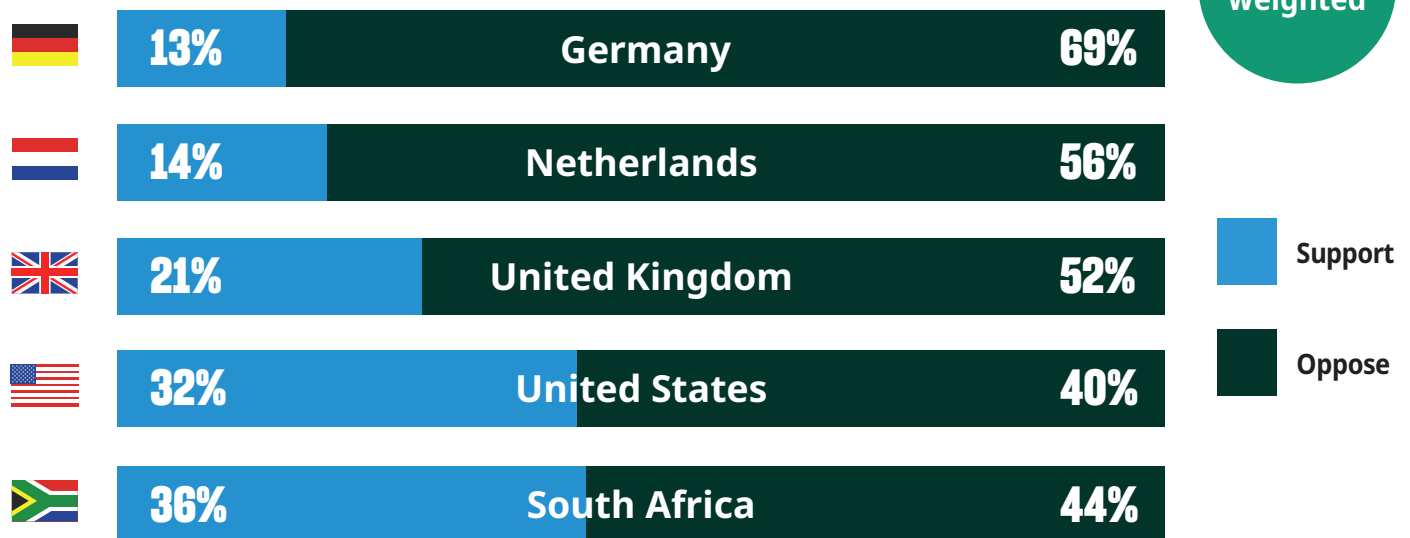


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Key finding

Opposition outweighs support in every surveyed market

Net support vs Net oppose culling by market



Support for culling declines with age

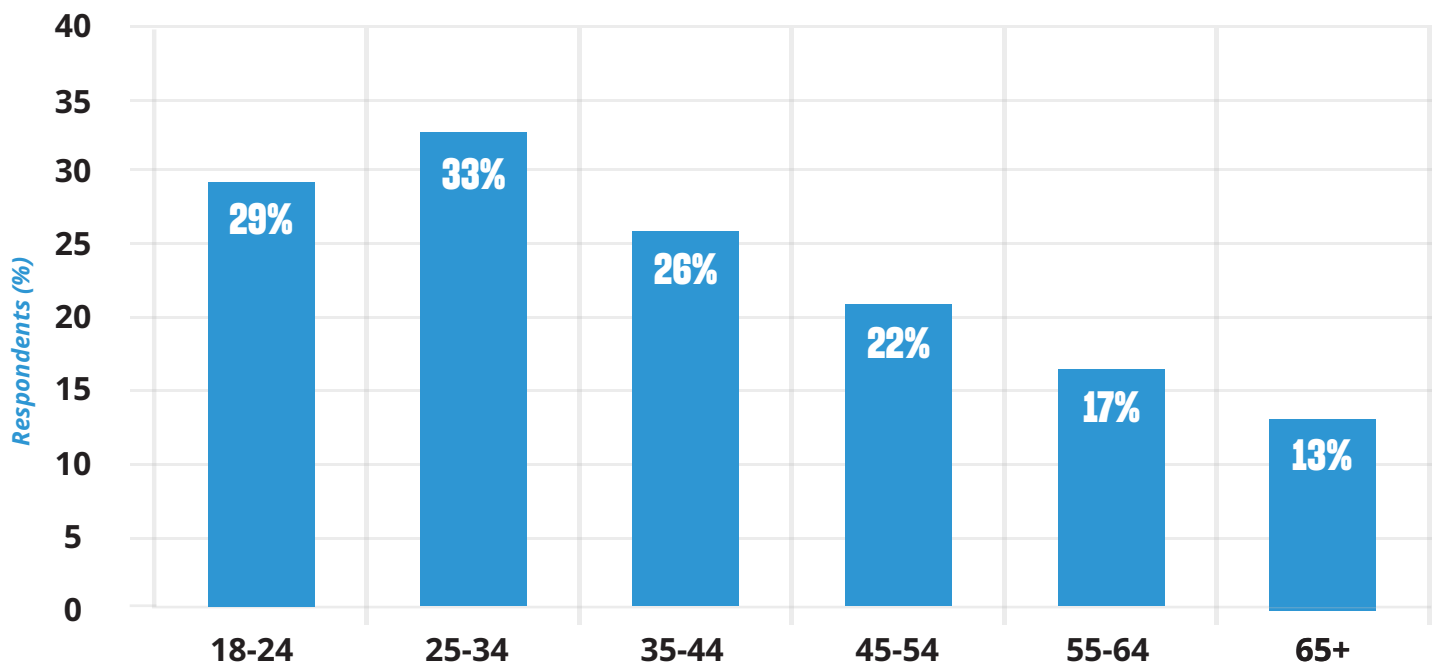


Fig 4: Culling support across age distribution

How international tourists would respond to elephant culling

47%

would be LESS LIKELY to visit South Africa if culling were introduced



Germany



UK



NL



US

65%

agree how a country manages its wildlife would influence their decision to visit; 60% would consider a *different* country if SA

80%

agree *non-lethal options (below)* should be prioritised over lethal ones where possible — the single most-agreed statement of the survey



Range expansion



Wildlife corridors



Immuno-contraception



Water-source management



No active intervention

Behavioural impact — Of the 47% less likely to visit South Africa, their actions would shift to:

69%

Avoid the specific area/province

38%

Avoid wildlife activities (safari, etc.)

20%

Spend less money on the trip

19%

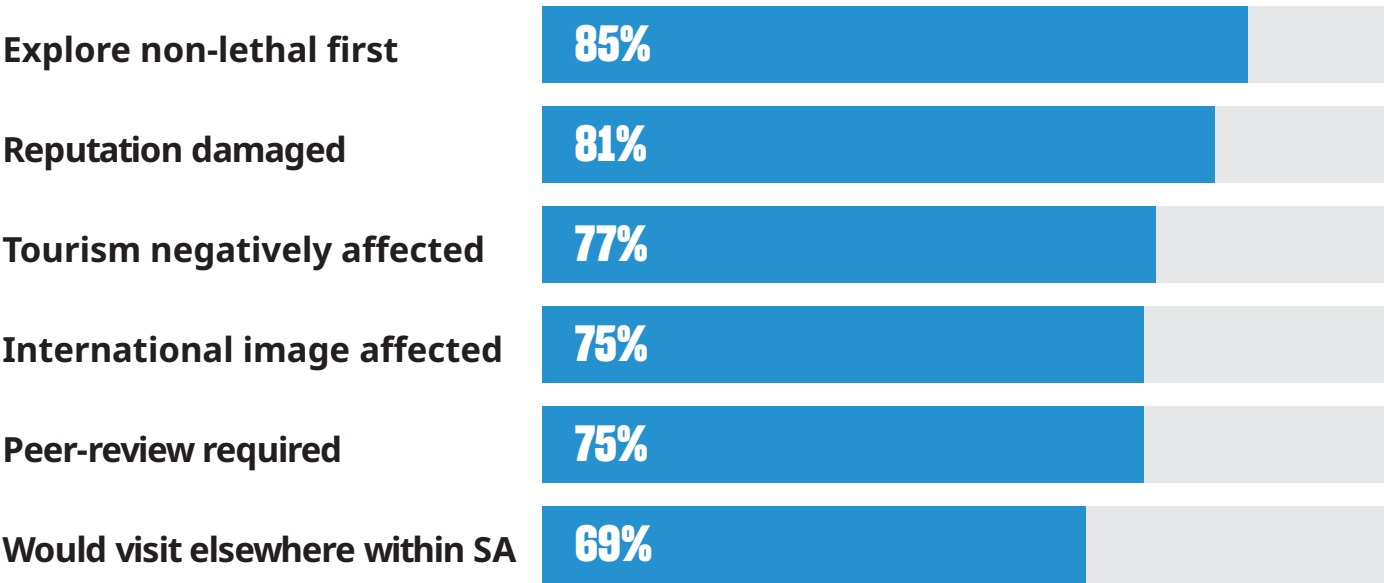
Shorten the trip

How South African residents would respond to elephant culling

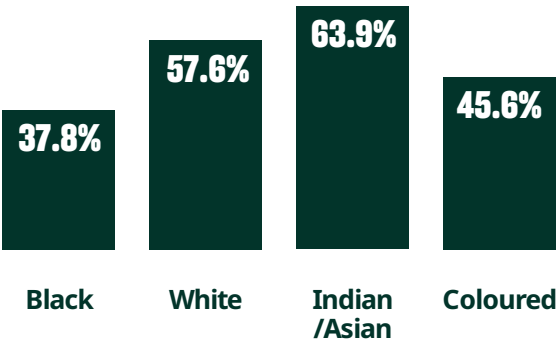
77%

of South African residents agree that tourism would be negatively affected if elephant culling were introduced.

Agreement Levels



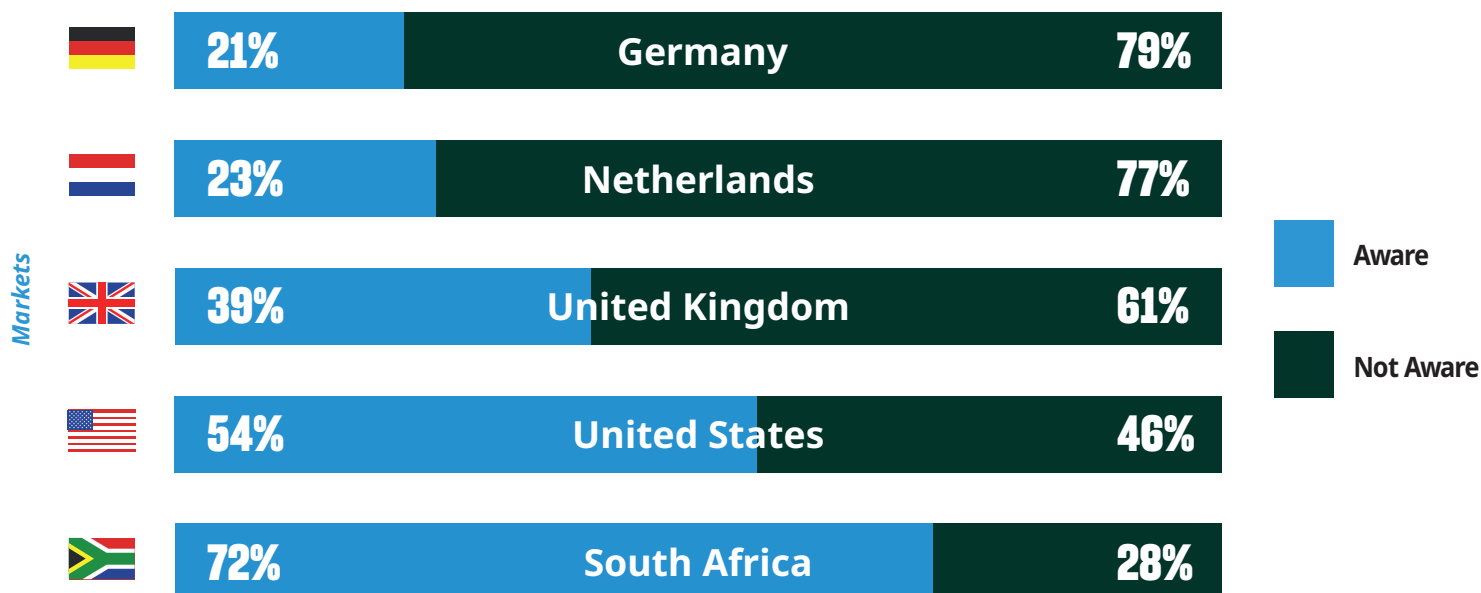
South African population-group opposition to elephant culling (%)



What would reduce concern about a culling decision?

- 36% Evidence that non-lethal options were tried first
- 39% Clear last-resort commitment
- 41% Transparent decision-making
- 35% Public consultation

Awareness of elephant management in South Africa



Net support vs net oppose of culling by South African province

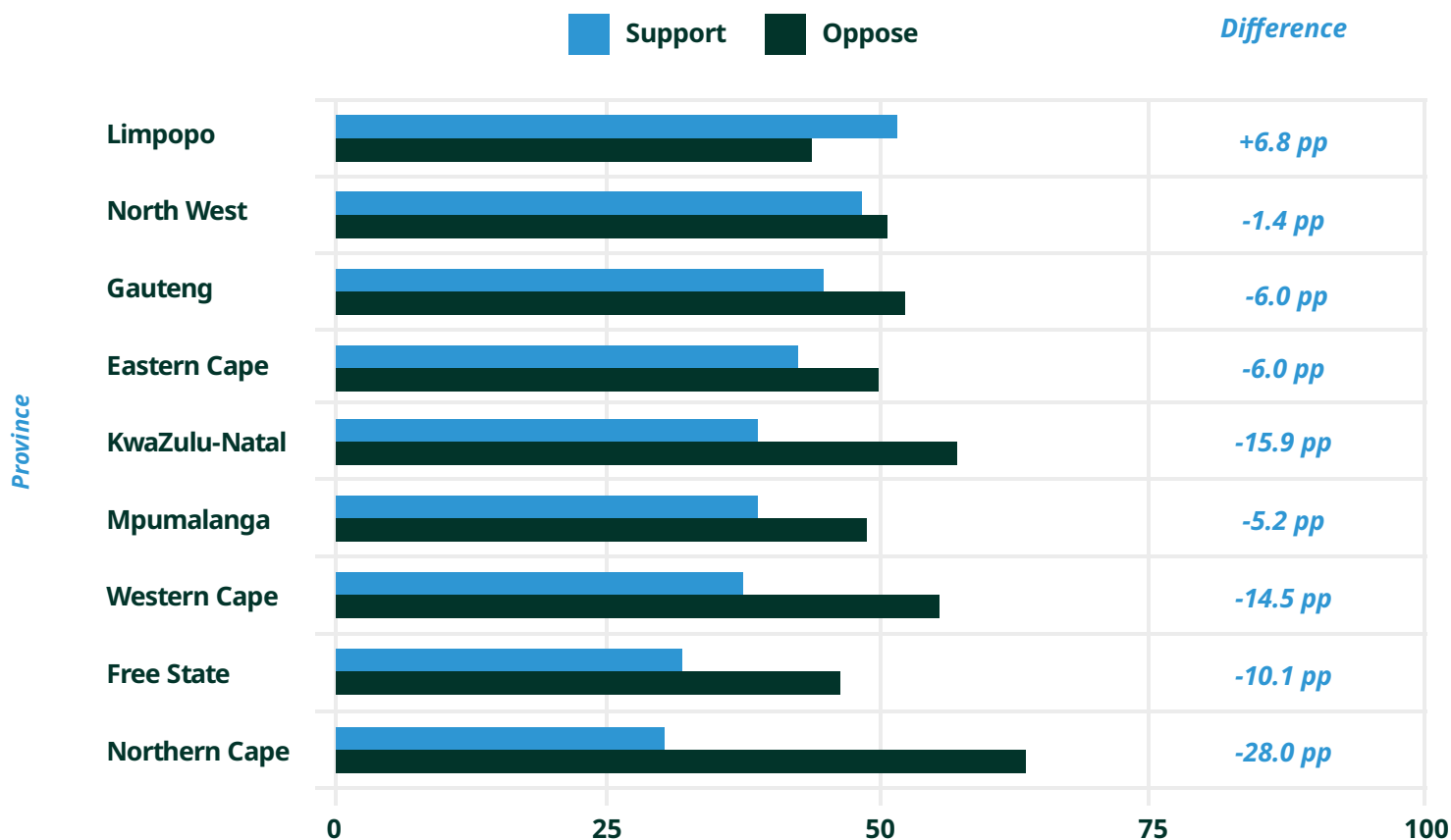


Fig 5: Respondents (%)



What this means



Tourism risk

Nearly half of international tourists would reconsider visiting South Africa if culling were introduced, indicating a measurable tourism risk.



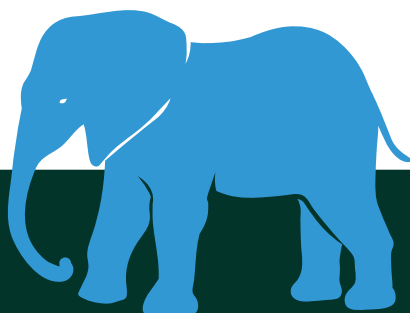
Conservation reputation

Both international and South African respondents believe culling could damage South Africa's reputation as a conservation leader.



Policy implications

Public support is strongest for non-lethal management, transparency, public consultation and independent scientific review.



"Across both audiences, large-scale elephant culling presents a measurable reputational and tourism risk for South Africa."

Conclusion and Recommendations

The survey consistently finds greater opposition than support for elephant culling and identifies potential consequences for tourism demand and conservation reputation in South Africa.

1

Prioritise non-lethal management

Use fertility control, translocation and habitat management wherever feasible.

2

Use culling only as a last resort

Require clear evidence that alternatives have been exhausted.

3

Increase transparency

Publish the scientific rationale, monitoring data and decision process.

4

Strengthen public consultation

Engage communities, tourism stakeholders and conservation experts before major policy changes.

5

Require independent scientific review

Ensure any proposed culling policy is subject to external peer review.

Final takeaway

The findings suggest that protecting South Africa's tourism brand and conservation reputation is most compatible with a transparent, science-based and predominantly non-lethal, precautionary elephant management strategy consistent with NEMA.

A photograph of an elephant standing in a savanna with tall yellow grass, looking towards the camera. The image is partially obscured by a blue curved shape at the bottom.

Technical statement

All data, unless stated otherwise, is from a survey conducted by Savanta of 5,027 adults across five markets: South Africa (1,002), Germany (1,003), Netherlands (1,010), USA (1,011) and the UK (1,001).

The survey was conducted online between 5–17 June 2026. Results were weighted by age, gender and region to be nationally representative within each market. Savanta is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited through established online research panels, including providers such as Cint and PureSpectrum. Nationally representative quotas for age, gender and region were applied in each country.

Technical notes

Margin of error	±3.1% at the 95% confidence level for each market
Dates of survey	5–17 June 2026
Interview method	Online survey
Weighting variables	Age, gender, region

Survey Questions

Q1: How aware are you of how elephant populations are currently managed in South Africa?

Response Options: Very aware to Not aware at all

Q3: To what extent do you support or oppose culling as a tool for managing elephant populations?

Response Options: Strongly support to Strongly oppose

Q4: How favourable do you feel about each approach for managing elephant populations?

Approaches rated: Range expansion; Wildlife corridors; Immunocontraception; Water-source management; Culling; No active intervention

Response Options: Very favourable to Very unfavourable

Q6: If South Africa were to introduce elephant culling, how would this affect your likelihood of visiting the country for a leisure trip?

Response Options: More likely / No difference / Less likely / Don't know

Q7: Based on Q6, how would you change your travel to South Africa?

Response Options: Avoid the specific area or province where culling was taking place; Avoid wildlife-focused activities (e.g. safari) and choose city-based trips instead; Spend less money during my trip than otherwise would have; Shorten my trip; Don't know; None of the above - my trip would be unaffected; Other (please specify)

Q8 and Q9 for SA and Intl respondents: To what extent do you agree or disagree with statements about elephant management?

Statements: SA elephant management affects international image; Tourism impact (negative/positive); Explore non-lethal options first; Base decisions on scientific evidence; Reputation damage from culling; Would visit elsewhere if culling introduced

Response Options: Strongly agree to Strongly disagree

Q10: How important should different factors be in elephant management decisions?

Factors: Peer-reviewed scientific evidence; Welfare of individual animals; Long-term biodiversity outcomes; Long-term economic benefits; Short-term economic benefits; Tourism revenue impact; SA's international reputation; Views of global north/western countries

Response Options: Very important to Not at all important

Q11: Which options would reduce your concerns if culling were used?

Response Options: Transparency; Last resort commitment; Non-lethal alternatives tried first; Scale/frequency limits; Public consultation; Humane methods; Independent population monitoring; Family group limitations; Welfare specialist oversight; Scientific oversight; Revenue reinvestment; Whole family groups only; None of these; Don't know

Thank You

Prepared by

Dr. Audrey Delsink, Senior Director, Wildlife
adelsink@humaneworld.org

Dr. Matthew Schurch, Senior Specialist, Wildlife
mschurch@humaneworld.org

Tony Gerrans, Executive Director
tgerrans@humaneworld.org

**Humane World for Animals
South Africa**

Data source

**Savanta Tourist Perceptions
South Africa (2026)**

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