

# Wildlife imports from African countries stopped



*Foot and mouth disease in the mouth (above) and in swine (below)*

**Why have wildlife imports from African countries to the north of South Africa stopped or appear to have stopped? I thought it necessary and important to discuss a few reasons why it seems almost impossible to import wildlife from our northern neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique, as well as West and East African countries.**

Dr Johan Kriek



*Global rinderpest*



*Hercules C139 freight planes for ease of carriage through infected areas*

## History

In the past (before 1982), very few animals, if any, were allowed into South Africa from the northern parts. The South African economy relies on its agricultural sector for exports to a large extent.

These exports to the rest of the world will only be permitted by importing countries if they are assured of risk-free imports. Most of the foot-and-mouth blood testing before 1982 was done in Pirbright, England. Since 1982 the foot-and-mouth facility (laboratory) at Onderstepoort has been doing all the testing.

The potential importer and the director of veterinary services agreed on the protocols, and once they were satisfied that their standards would be maintained by the importer and the exporting country, they would then issue a veterinary import permit on condition that the animals had to pass certain disease-screening tests. These tests (of which that for foot-and-mouth disease was the most important) were supervised by an official state veterinarian. This included inspections of quarantine stations at the exporting and importing points, being present at every sample collection, and escorting samples to the foot-and-mouth laboratory from the country of export to South Africa.

Another important prerequisite was that there was no foot-and-mouth outbreak in the exporting country at the time of proposed imports. The laboratory

also had to test for all the known foot-and-mouth strains, which included SAT1 (South African Type 1), SAT2 and SAT3, European strains A, O and C, as well as Asia I and II – if they were deemed necessary. There also had to be a single screening test for rinderpest.

At that stage (1980) rinderpest was still presumed to be present in North Africa in small pockets. In 1896 this disease was responsible for wiping out millions of domestic stock and wildlife, mainly cattle and buffalo. Fortunately, due to strict control, such as vaccinations and slaughter of small pockets, it was brought under control. Over 5 million cattle were killed in Africa in the 1890s with the big rinderpest outbreak.

A Lord Derby eland capture took place in a West African country in the 1970–1980s and these animals were destined for South Africa. Upon testing, rinderpest antibodies were found in some of these animals and the director of veterinary services (SA) refused permission for these animals to enter the country.

The directorate of veterinary services (SA) allowed quite a number of animals to be imported from Zimbabwe (1984), Malawi (1986, 1991) and Zimbabwe (1994). These importations helped to bolster numbers and genetic diversity of sable, roan, Livingstone eland and tsessebe in the country. Quite a few of these animals went to Namibia via



**Imported from Zimbabwe in 1984, these tsessebe were kept at a quarantine station at Pietersburg.**



**At Malawi airport**



**Roan pen**



South Africa. Some sable were also allowed in from Zambia. Unfortunately, a few things have changed since then and this has led to stricter control of importations.

A foot-and-mouth outbreak occurred on the western boundary of Kruger National Park (KNP) around 2000, and another in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) a few years later, causing South Africa to lose its OIE status. The country then had to apply even stricter control measures. It was still possible to import wildlife into the country, but in order to regain our OIE status, we had to convince the European Union that we had proper control over our foot-and-mouth areas (KNP) and that no foot-and-mouth outbreaks, such as that in KZN, would happen again. Fortunately, we managed to get back our OIE status. One important prerequisite was that South Africa would import only from countries that had OIE status. Countries like Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi seemed to have lost their status and thus no more imports were allowed. These, in short, are some of the reasons why imports were getting more difficult.

Some members of the game-farming industry further aggravated the import situation through some rash decisions, which also affected our relationship with the directorate of veterinary services.

Some farmers tried to bypass the director of veterinary services by going straight to the minister. This should never be allowed as the director is appointed in this position with the sole responsibility of disease control.

Some farmers took veterinary departments to court to force them to issue them with an import permit for sable. This, of course, had a very bad response. The importation was refused immediately and again at the appeal court hearing. Unfortunately, this resulted in the directorate of veterinary services having to apply the law to the letter.

On numerous occasions, some farmers have tried to smuggle animals

into South Africa. This is completely irresponsible and selfish with no consideration for the implications this would have on our game industry and the potential threat to food security.

Animals have also been airlifted into South Africa illegally by some opportunistic 'businessmen', one of which was caught in Polokwane. Here again they are completely irresponsible, not thinking of the damage they can cause, not only to our flourishing game industry but to our country's economy. If disease should enter the country without the veterinary directorate's control, it will have far-reaching implications.

There is a great risk of a new disease (similar to rinderpest) that is currently spreading through North Africa and affects small ruminants (sheep, goats, impala, etc). This disease will pose a serious threat to our wildlife industry, should strict control measures not be in place.

**I think it is high time that we wildlife farmers report any illegal activities of fellow wildlife ranchers to the relevant authorities. They only have their own interests at heart.**

A veterinarian that visited me recently, had sampled domestic stock and wildlife in many countries in West and East Africa; the shocking news is that 98% of domestic stock and 2% of wildlife show antibody titres to this new disease. Thus the risk, combined with the fact that we have the best genes from all over Africa represented in many herds in South Africa, makes imports irrelevant and not of much consequence, should we never be allowed to import again in future.

I sampled 400 sable in Zambia recently and because of no human selection the quality is definitely not superior but in most cases inferior to the sable we currently farm with in South Africa. Fortunately, we did import sufficient unrelated gene pools in the past when it was still allowed. We are thus set for the future, given that we maintain a policy of genetic diversity.

We game farmers have selected top animals within the indigenous subspecies of sable and roan over the last few decades. This has contributed to the genetic diversity and quality of our herds, which are probably superior to most populations in the rest of Africa. 🦋