

TOURISM

Is Kruger overcrowded? What 2m visitors mean for the park

ZAMANDOSI CELE

VIRAL photos of bumper-to-bumper 4x4s surrounding a lone lion have ignited a fierce debate online: Has South Africa's premier safari destination reached its breaking point?

With Kruger National Park welcoming a record two million guests over the past year, the wilderness experience is increasingly punctuated by idling engines and jockeying vehicles.

But behind the headline numbers lies a more complex reality, one where the problem isn't the size of the reserve, but where and how those visitors gather.

The answer, according to Professor Peet van der Merwe, who teaches Tourism Management at North-West University, is more complicated.

Kruger welcomed a record 1 959 757 guests during the 2025/26 financial year, according to the Department of Tourism.

That is equivalent to an average of about 5 370 guest entries a day if distributed evenly across the year, although visitors are not spread evenly through the park or across the calendar.

The latest SANParks annual report recorded 1 868 416 Kruger visits in 2024/25, compared with 1 815 404 in 2023/24 and 1 833 061 in the pre-Covid 2019/20 financial year.

Yet Van der Merwe says it would be inaccurate to label the entire park as overtourism.

Kruger is crowded but not everywhere "There is no overtourism, given the park's size and the level of infrastructure development," he said.

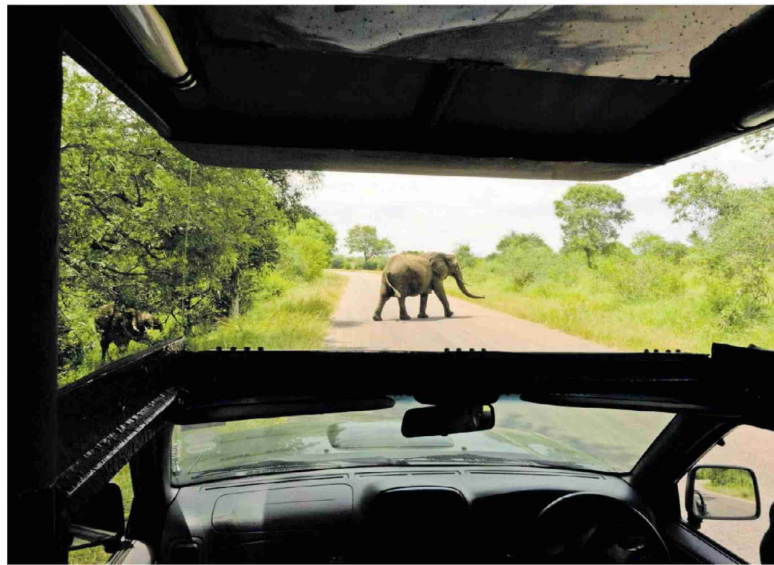
The nearly two-million-hectare protected area has less than 5% developed, including roads and camps. The greater concern, he argues, is localised crowding, particularly in southern Kruger.

His research found that crowding is concentrated around wildlife sightings, day-visitor areas, picnic sites, restaurants and entrance gates.

A previous study cited in his research found that 90.9% of visitors surveyed believed the southern section was crowded.

The pressure is particularly noticeable around the Big Five and other sought-after predators.

"People tend to stop there longer than at other species, such as sable antelope, kudu and impala," Van der Merwe said. This helps explain why almost two million annual visits do not necessarily translate into a park-wide overcrowding problem.



AN ELEPHANT crosses a paved road in the Kruger National Park, viewed from inside an open safari vehicle. | Unsplash

When a sighting becomes a traffic jam Safari enthusiast, digital creator and conservation advocate Sean de la Harpe believes vehicle congestion around high-profile sightings has worsened.

He stressed that he is not anti-tourism or anti-safari vehicles.

"Tourism is enormously important to conservation, and well-managed open safari vehicles are an integral part of responsible wildlife tourism," he said.

The problem begins, he believes, when wildlife viewing becomes competitive.

"I increasingly see high-profile sightings turning into traffic jams," De la Harpe said.

Vehicles manoeuvring for position, engines starting, people talking and photographers trying to secure the best image can transform a wildlife encounter.

"The problem begins when the experience becomes a competition rather than an observation."

Research published in the *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism* has also documented growing crowding of open safari vehicles in southern Kruger, alongside complaints about the number and behaviour of some operators.

Could crowded sightings affect wildlife?

The concern goes beyond the quality of the visitor experience.

Van der Merwe said vehicle congestion can affect wildlife behaviour.

"Definitely yes, especially the wildlife experience of visitors. It also affects the animals' behaviour; for example, I have seen predators use vehicles to box in prey."

De la Harpe said vehicles should not be regarded as invisible within the ecosystem.

"If enough vehicles surround an animal, we can obstruct its vision, restrict its movement, create noise and potentially alter its decision-making," he said.

Cheetahs, he added, are particularly vulnerable because they rely heavily on their ability to detect threats and escape quickly.

Research into crowding in southern Kruger has found visitors reporting blocked roads and vehicles positioning themselves incorrectly around sightings.

The study concluded that enforcement of vehicle behaviour rules is important in addressing congestion.

Does Kruger have visitor quotas?

Yes. SANParks operates a daily visitor threshold for Kruger. When the threshold is reached, day visitors without pre-booked overnight accommodation may be refused entry.

SANParks says the situation generally arises during particularly busy periods such as public holidays and long weekends.

Gate quotas are also used to manage pressure.

SANParks introduced quotas to

prevent overcrowding on roads and at facilities, and its current Open Safari Vehicle programme sets gate quotas in terms of people.

For example, the 2025 quota document lists 1 100 people for Crocodile Bridge Gate, 800 for Kruger Gate, 800 for Malelane, 800 for Numbi, 700 for Orpen, 800 for Phabeni, 600 for Pafuri, 800 for Phalaborwa and 700 for Punda Maria.

These figures should not be interpreted as a single park-wide vehicle limit.

They demonstrate that visitor access is actively controlled at individual gates, while the pressure inside the park can still become concentrated at particular sightings.

SANParks also imposed gate quotas during the 2025 festive season specifically to prevent overcrowding on roads and facilities.

The challenge: spreading visitors out

For Van der Merwe, the solution is therefore not necessarily to reduce tourism across Kruger, but to better manage where visitors go and how they behave.

He suggests additional visitor attractions, picnic sites and viewpoints to disperse traffic, more personnel during school holidays, stronger reporting mechanisms for inappropriate behaviour and greater promotion of the quieter northern sections.

He also questions the impact of technology that allows visitors to locate sought-after animals in real time.

De la Harpe similarly supports stronger management at sensitive sightings, including reasonable viewing times and stricter enforcement where vehicles interfere with wildlife.

The challenge is becoming increasingly important as Kruger's popularity grows.

The park's record visitor numbers demonstrate the economic and conservation value of tourism.

But if visitors increasingly encounter traffic jams rather than wilderness, the quality of the experience could suffer.

As Van der Merwe puts it, the biggest long-term risk is "a run-down wildlife or poor wildlife experience".

That may be the real question facing Kruger. Not whether nearly two million visitors are too many for a two-million-hectare wilderness area – but whether the park can keep those visitors distributed, responsible and respectful enough to ensure that the wildlife remains the main attraction, rather than the crowds around it.

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