



AJ Rossouw using the tracking device to establish where the cheetahs are.



The eighty-seven-kilometer electric fence erected around the new nature reserve.



A group of international tourists lined up in trucks to witness the release of the cheetahs into the wild.

## Protected wilderness to boost AfriCat rehab

By Fifi Rhodes

**OKONJIMA** – Two years of intense planning and blood, sweat and tears have made it possible to complete the last stage (16 000 ha) of the Okonjima Private Nature Reserve (22 000 ha).

This protected wilderness enables the AfriCat Foundation to expand and accelerate its rehabilitation programme with the ultimate aim of returning more large carnivores to the wild. Over the last 17 years the AfriCat Foundation has rescued over 1 000 cheetahs and leopards that have been trapped as a result of human/wildlife conflict

on the farmlands in Namibia. Over 85 percent of these big cats have been returned to the wild. As with most animal rescue programmes, there are those individuals that cannot be released immediately. Injured as well as orphaned cheetahs and leopards, too young to be on their own in the wild without their mothers, are taken into AfriCat's care.

On Monday the last four of 17 cats returned to the wild ...

AfriCat's large carnivore rehabilitation programme was initiated in 2000 to give some of their captive cheetahs an opportunity to return to their natural environ-

ment. The first cheetahs that were released into this new reserve on May 18 are between four and five years old, most having been in captivity from an early age. All 17 released cheetahs, as well as the four wild dogs that were in captivity from the age of three weeks and that were released on September 9, have undergone a thorough veterinary examination to ensure that they are in good health and fit enough to be released. The dogs have also been fitted with radio collars so that they can be tracked on a daily basis in order to monitor their welfare, condition and hunting successes.

By Fifi Rhodes

The last four captive cheetahs – Scully, Mulder, Tintin and Abbey – were orphaned at the age of six months when their mother was shot dead. The siblings (two males and two females) are now seven years old and got a second chance to live as wild cheetahs.

The group will remain in the Okonjima Reserve as ambassadors for the AfriCat Rehabilitation Programme, as they are too habituated to be released into the wild. This group is older than most of the cheetahs that have been released

into the reserve so far. Their teeth are in excellent condition so there is no reason why they shouldn't do well and learn to hunt and become self-sustaining.

The rehabilitation programme gives these cheetahs the opportunity to hone their hunting skills and become self-sustaining in a protected area. Orphaned at an early age, some of these cats have missed out on all that they should have learned from their mothers while growing up – not only hunting skills and techniques but also the essential "life skills" needed to survive in the wild.

Returning these large carnivores to their natural habitat will allow them to reproduce and contribute to the growth of wild populations and ultimately the survival of their species in the wild.

can now only learn these life skills by way of experience – lessons that are often hard and sometimes fatal. Knowing which other predators to avoid – and when to back off – and relinquish hard-earned prey, and avoiding injuries from the horns, tusks and hooves of prey animals are just some of the lessons that need to be learned.

## Interesting facts

Namibia is home to approximately 25 percent of the world's cheetah population, of which 90 percent live on farm land. There are no up-to-date population figures, but in 1987 the estimate was between 2 500 and 3 000.

The cheetah is listed as Appendix 1 of the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES), as an endangered species.

Cheetahs can reach a top speed of between 100 and 118 km per hour, which they can maintain over a distance of 300 to 600 metres.

Of the 809 cheetahs and leopards that have been through AfriCat over the last 11 years, 83.8 percent rescued from traps were released

or relocated; 3.9 percent have died or had to be euthanised; and 12.3 percent (mainly orphans), remained in the care of AfriCat.

AfriCat started a cheetah rehabilitation programme in November 2000 to give orphans with no previous hunting experience an opportunity to act on their inherent instincts and perfect their hunting skills.

The cheetahs are radio-collared and released into a 16 000-hectare area which contains a variety of game species.

AfriCat feeds over 100 cheetahs, leopards, lions and caracals.

This requires 8.5 tonnes of meat, chicken and lambs cat food every month.



Two of the cheetahs that were successfully rehabilitated at Okonjima.



Warthog grazing on a lawn.

## AfriCat raises community environmental awareness

AFRICAT is not only involved in rescue, release and rehabilitation programmes, but also continues to involve as many young Namibians in its environmental education programmes. Since AfriCat inception more than 20 000 children have visited both the AfriCat and AfriCat North Education centres. Valuable research on cheetah and leopard continues as well as the further development of the human wildlife conflict mitigation programme.

AfriCat North, based along the south-western boundary of the Etosha National Park, initiated a

livestock protection programme in 2004 – concentrating on encouraging communal farmers to better protect their livestock by building stronger and re-instated herdsman.

Since there is a dire need for greater protection of the Namibian lion (panthera leo), as well as alleviation of human-wildlife conflict on both commercial and communal farmland, Okorusu Florspaar Mine Community Trust recently honoured AfriCat North by supporting its efforts. Okorusu Florspaar has dedicated much-needed funds for the development of the AfriCat Communal Carnivore

Conflict Project (CCCP), Cymot, together with one of its main suppliers of Greensport products, Campmor Outdoor, have supplied the mobile camp for this team.

The first of its kind in Namibia, the AfriCat Communal Carnivore Conflict Project will soon be in a position to effectively support and assist communal and commercial farmers with lion-related problems, as well as to ensure the protection of the wild lion along Etosha borders and elsewhere. In time these units will also be able to mitigate leopard, cheetah, hyena and wild dog conflict.



Carla Conradie with a bowl of meat chunks she used to lure the cheetahs out of their captive environment into the wild.



Cheetahs pounce on a bowl of meat chunks.



Donna Hansen of AfriCat Rehabilitation Centre with tourists in the background waiting for the release of the cheetahs.

## Cheetahs star in television series

"Cheetah Kingdom" is a brand new television series, following the work of the AfriCat Foundation and in particular the largest cheetah release programme attempted in Namibia.

The first group released on May 18 – four males and two female cheetahs – was cared for by AfriCat in a similar enclosure, but are now mature enough to be given a second chance in the wild.

Females usually live and hunt separately from males.

These released groups have lived together since they were cubs and formed an unusual bond. The ITV film crew recently spent four months (May-September) on Okonjima filming the series on some of AfriCats previously cheetahs that were part of the historic release into the new 16 000-hectare Okonjima private nature reserve.

Another six episodes will be screened between now and December this year, putting Namibia yet again firmly on the map in the UK.



Animals such as oryx, kudu, gemsbok and warthogs in the new reserve.