

Rescued cheetahs find safe home at Okonjima

• TANJA BAUSE

A FINAL group of four cheetahs have been released into Okonjima's new 16 000-hectare private game reserve. Since May, 17 once-captive cheetah and four wild dogs have been released to run free.

Over the past 17 years the AfriCat Foundation has rescued more than 1 000 cheetahs and leopards trapped as a result of human-wildlife conflict. More than 85 per cent of these animals have been returned to the wild, but some cannot be released immediately as they may be too young or have injuries.

After ten years of planning the Okonjima Private Nature Reserve, 22 000 hectares of wilderness, will enable AfriCat to expand and accelerate its rehabilitation programme with the aim of returning more large carnivores back into the wild.

"All the cheetahs were rescued and this is their first taste of freedom. Once they are fully self-sufficient they will be relocated to permanent safe homes as wild rehabilitated cheetahs," says Andre Rossouw, who follows the cheetahs' progress in the wild. "Successful rehabilitation is when an animal can look after itself for food, water and shelter in the wild," he added.

The first cheetahs that were released were between four and five years old, most having been in captivity from an early age. All 17 released cheetahs were examined by a veterinarian and

fitted with radio collars to monitor their welfare, condition and hunting success on a daily basis.

A group of four cheetahs are being especially closely monitored by Rossouw. The group initially consisted of five members but sadly Frankie was killed by a leopard. The remaining four – Coco, Spud, Bones and Hammer – are doing exceptionally well and are in the process of fine-tuning their hunting skills.

"They make a kill every three to four days and that is enough for them, they will be able to survive as wild cheetahs," says Rossouw.

He sees the group of four each day but the other seven remaining pairs and single cheetahs he only observes once a week. They are wild and ready to find new permanent safe homes, so human contact is kept to a minimum.

The last group of four to be released were orphaned at the age of six months when their mother was shot on commercial farmland. The siblings – Scully, Mulder, Tintin and Abbey – are now seven years old and getting a second chance to live as wild cheetahs.

They, as well as the first group of four and the wild dogs, will stay in the Okonjima Private Nature Reserve as ambassadors for the AfriCat Foundation Programme, as they are too habituated to be released into the wild.

Because these cubs were orphaned at a very early age they have missed out on everything they should have learned from their mother while growing up, like hunting skills and techniques and the essential life skills needed to survive in the wilderness. Some of the lessons that need to be learned are when to back off and relinquish hard-earned prey, how to avoid injuries from the horns, hooves and tusks of prey animals.

"We do not teach our predators, we provide them with an environment that has everything in place, the right prey base, water, shelter and they learn by trial and error. Should they however fail continuously in catching prey we give them enough food to sustain their energy but not enough to still their hunger so soon they are on the hunt again, learning and becoming self-sustaining," says Donna Hanssen of AfriCat/Okonjima.

THE QUARTET ... The first group of four that were released into the Okonjima Private Nature Reserve.



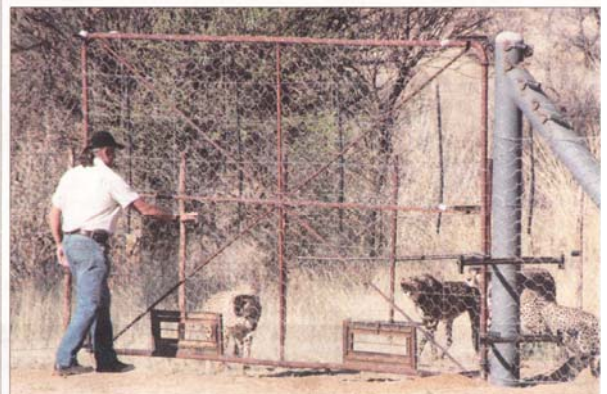
CLOSE VIEW ... A host of sponsors, tourists and journalists witnessed the release of the last group of four cheetahs into the Okonjima Private Nature Reserve.



TOP SECURITY ... The fully electrified boundary fence enclosing the 22 000 hectares of the original Okonjima lodge and nature reserve.



CHECKING ... Andre Rossouw looks for cheetahs and wild dogs with a radio antenna.



FREE ... Dave Houghton of the AfriCat Foundation opens the gate to release the last group of four cheetahs into the Okonjima Private Nature Reserve.

Photos: Tanja Bause