

## **BORN TO BE WILD**

# **LARGE CARNIVORE REHABILITATION**

Over the last 17 years AfriCat has rescued over 1000 cheetahs and leopards that have been trapped as a result of human-wildlife conflict on the farmlands in Namibia. Over 85% 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.

*Now these cats get their chance to return to the wild .....*

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

Ten years on, the fencing of a 40 000-acre area within the Okonjima reserve has been completed. This protected wilderness enables AfriCat to expand and accelerate its rehabilitation programme with the ultimate aim of returning more large carnivores to the wild.



The first cheetahs to be released into this new reserve are between 4 and 5½ years old, most having been in captivity from an early age. All six have undergone a thorough veterinary examination to ensure they are in good health and fit enough to be released. They 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.

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, four of these cats have missed out on all that they should have learnt from their mother while growing up – not only hunting skills and techniques but the essential life-skills needed to survive in the wild. These cheetahs can now only learn these life skills by way of experience; lessons often being hard and unfortunately, 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 learnt.

More cheetahs are scheduled to be released into the rehabilitation area in the next few months. Other future plans for the Okonjima reserve include the release of a sibling group of wild dogs that have been in captivity from the age of three weeks, as well as several orphaned leopards who are now old enough to be independent.

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

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