



FIRST WILD CHEETAH IN THE FREE STATE IN OVER A CENTURY

24th June 2013

Start

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), in partnership with Laohu Valley Reserve and Amakhala Game Reserve, is proud to announce the reintroduction of wild Cheetah into the Free State. The Free State is the only province in South Africa that has not had wild Cheetah for over 100 years, and the two males released at Laohu Valley Reserve constitute the first wild Cheetah in the Free State since they were eliminated from that province during the colonial period. Cheetah are classified as Vulnerable by the International Union for the Conservation of nature and it is estimated that there are less than 1000 Cheetah left in South Africa – making them our country's second most threatened carnivore.

“This reintroduction marks an extremely important moment in our battle to save the Cheetah from extinction. The reintroduction is the culmination of years of work and the building of great relationships and we are extremely excited to be returning this beautiful, fleet-footed African carnivore to the Free State,” said Kelly Marnewick, Manager of the EWT's Carnivore Conservation Programme.

The two male Cheetah that were released at Laohu Valley Reserve in the Free State were born in July 2010 on Amakhala Game Reserve. Amakhala is a 5700ha reserve and the cubs have, from birth, roamed free on the property and hunted and fended for themselves.

The rapidly increasing human population is putting severe pressure on protected areas and natural resources. Snares set for bushmeat often end up killing Cheetah and this has been identified as a significant threat throughout their range in Africa. Furthermore, persecution by farmers threatens the survival of Cheetahs outside protected areas.

Cheetah that occur inside smaller, fenced reserves like Amakhala and Laohu need to be managed artificially to prevent inbreeding and overpopulation. These reserves provide an important population of protected Cheetah, outside of the Cheetah populations that roam the Kruger National Park. However, management of these fenced populations is intensive, expensive, involves long-term commitments and is challenging due to the fact that these smaller populations are more vulnerable to threats.

“Cheetah have been reintroduced into approximately 48 reserves across southern Africa for tourism and ecological reasons and currently 272 Cheetah, sourced from South Africa and Namibia, occur in

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The Endangered Wildlife Trust is a non-profit, public benefit organisation dedicated to conserving species and ecosystems in southern Africa to the benefit of all people.

NPO Number: 015-502, **PBO number:** 930 001 777, **Member of IUCN** - The International Union for Conservation of Nature
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fenced reserves. Unfortunately the management of the reintroductions has been haphazard and unguided by a longer term conservation strategy. This has resulted in the population declining at a rate of 6% per annum due to a variety of factors including predator naïve Cheetah being introduced into reserves with high Lion densities and being killed by Lions; the sale of Cheetah into captivity; and excessive contraception programmes. Without a larger, overarching management plan, the conservation benefit of Cheetah in small reserves cannot be realised,” commented Vincent van der Merwe, co-ordinator of the EWT’s Cheetah Metapopulation Project.

The EWT is addressing the conservation challenges facing Cheetah at various levels. From local, on-the-ground conservation initiatives, to working with governments and international non-governmental organisations to develop range-wide conservation action. During 2011, the EWT’s Carnivore Conservation Programme launched the Cheetah Metapopulation Project, the aim of which is to facilitate a coordinated management approach to Cheetah reintroductions on small reserves and thus maximise the conservation value and contribute to the range expansion of Cheetah in South Africa.

Conservation Finance International, which operates Laohu Valley Reserve, financed the restoration of Laohu Valley Reserve’s 33,000 ha of habitat in an effort to restore the environment to its natural state. This included removing over 350 kms of internal fences, surplus farm buildings and clearing traps and poisons. There has been a substantial increase in game through both re-introduction and natural species recovery due to the rehabilitation of the reserve and the next phase of the restoration effort is the reintroduction of Cheetah to the reserve.

Stuart Bray, Partner at Conservation Finance International, stated, “I would like to personally thank the EWT for their assistance in this reintroduction. Without the EWT, this would not have been possible. This is truly an historic day for the Free State and a milestone in the effort to restore Laohu Valley Reserve to its natural state.”

Giles Gush, Chairman of Amakhala Game Reserve, commented: “Amakhala Game Reserve is proud to be part of the reintroduction of Cheetah to the Free State. We are pleased to be able to make a contribution to Cheetah conservation by being part of the EWT’s Cheetah Meta-population Project and making our two, handsome, wild male Cheetah available to Laohu Valley Reserve for the reintroduction. We wish them every success with this project.”

In conclusion Marnewick said, “We look forward to introducing a female Cheetah onto Laohu Valley and hopefully seeing the first wild cubs born in the Free State Province in over a century.”

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Thank you to Fourways Halfway Toyota for providing the transportation for the Cheetah. The Cheetah Metapopulation Project is sponsored by Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, Scovill Zoo and St Louis Zoo. Funds have also been generated from the sale of Relate bracelets www.relate.org.za For further information about the EWT's Carnivore Conservation Programme please contact Kelly Marnewick on kellym@ewt.org.za and Vincent van der Merwe on vincentv@ewt.org.za

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