



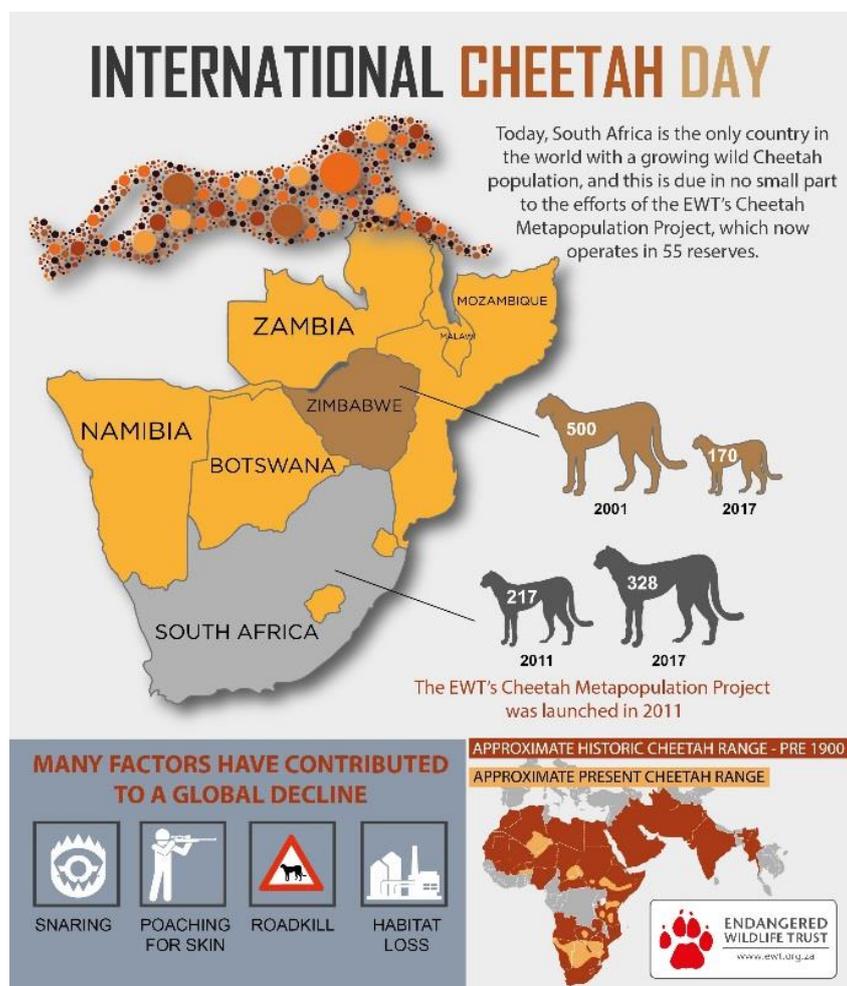
4 December 2017

## Celebrating conservation successes this International Cheetah Day

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This International Cheetah Day, celebrated annually on 4 December, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) is celebrating the incredible success of its Cheetah Metapopulation Project.

This project was launched by the EWT in 2011, and in just six years has grown wild Cheetah numbers in South African reserves from 217 to 328 – an incredible 51% increase in just five years! This is thanks to many private and state reserves that are creating safe space for Cheetah populations.



Increasing human pressures on Cheetah include retaliatory killings in response to livestock attacks, snaring, poaching for skins, roadkill, and loss of space due to agriculture and urbanisation. These factors have contributed to a global decline in wild populations that has resulted in Cheetahs becoming extinct in 94% of their historical range. Cheetahs once roamed as far north as the former Soviet Union, and as far east as Myanmar (Burma) but, in just the past 15 years, the global population has declined by almost a quarter. For example, since 2001, Cheetah populations in Zimbabwe have declined from 500 to 170. Today, South Africa is the only country in the world with a growing wild Cheetah population, and this is due in no small part to the efforts of the EWT's Cheetah Metapopulation Project, which now operates in 55 reserves.

One such reserve is Rietvlei Nature Reserve, situated just outside the city of Pretoria, South Africa. The success of this conservation initiative between the City of Tshwane and the EWT was highlighted in early November 2017, when two female Cheetahs with litters of three and six cubs each, joined each other on a kill, treating delighted visitors at the reserve to a very rare sighting of eleven Cheetahs in one spot.

This special event marks an important new phase in the management of the Cheetahs at Rietvlei. The reserve currently supports a population of 12 Cheetahs, yet only has sufficient prey to support three. Vincent van der Merwe, the EWT's Cheetah Metapopulation Co-ordinator, says: "Prey populations in Rietvlei Nature Reserve have been severely reduced

over the past three years due to the success of the Cheetahs. Efforts will now be made to remove some of the Cheetahs from Rietvlei to ensure the survival of species such as Blesbok, Ostrich and Reedbuck, as well as maintain the genetic diversity of the resident Cheetah population.”

The City of Tshwane has offered the Cheetahs to other state and private game reserves across the country. In the next 18 months, 11 Cheetahs from Rietvlei will be relocated to Addo Elephant National Park, Marakele National Park, uMkhuze Game Reserve, Selati Private Game Reserve and Zimanga Private Game Reserve. They will bring with them new genetics to these reserves, contributing to the conservation of the species across the country.

The Rietvlei Cheetah conservation success story was made possible due to the safe space made available by the City of Tshwane, the input of the late Riaan Marais, funding from the Pretoria East Hunters Association, collars provided by the Friends of Rietvlei, monitoring by Rietvlei staff and overall coordination by the EWT.

Other important work being done by this project is in KwaZulu-Natal, at the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP). With only three related Cheetahs in the reserve by 2016, there were concerns that inbreeding, amongst other factors, had played a part in the population decline over the years.

The EWT’s Cheetah Metapopulation Project worked tirelessly to identify suitable Cheetahs for introduction into the reserve. Ultimately, four Cheetahs were sourced, with two females coming from Hopewell Private Game Reserve, one male from Shamwari Private Game Reserve, and one male from Mountain Zebra National Park, all Eastern Cape reserves. These cats were successfully relocated to HiP in early October, bringing with them the new genetics that will hopefully provide the stimulus for population growth. The Cheetahs continue to be monitored closely by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and Wildlife Act, and appear to be settling well into their new environment.

The EWT will source a further five Cheetahs for HiP over the next two years, to ensure the long-term stability of the wild Cheetah population in the reserve in the future.

With successes such as these, and as far afield as Malawi, where Cheetahs were reintroduced, in partnership with African Parks, for the first time in 20 years, the EWT’s Cheetah Metapopulation Project is going from strength to strength. Vincent van der Merwe was also recently recognised with a SANParks Kudu Award for his individual contribution to conservation as a result of this work, a fitting accolade for a project that is making a tangible difference to Cheetahs in the region.

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## **Contacts**

Vincent van der Merwe  
Cheetah Metapopulation Project Coordinator  
Endangered Wildlife Trust  
[vincenv@ewt.org.za](mailto:vincenv@ewt.org.za)

David Marneweck  
Carnivore Conservation Programme Manager  
Endangered Wildlife Trust  
Tel: +27 87 021 0398  
[davidm@ewt.org.za](mailto:davidm@ewt.org.za)

Belinda Glenn  
Marketing and Communications Manager  
Endangered Wildlife Trust  
Tel: +27 87 021 0398  
[belindag@ewt.org.za](mailto:belindag@ewt.org.za)