

The vision of the Emdoneni Lodge Cat Project is to create a wildlife awareness and education centre.

Our vision will be realised through the following objectives:

- The provision and maintenance of an environmentally friendly and aesthetic wildlife centre for selected feline species.
- The management of the centre in conformance with generally accepted standards and procedures and within the guidelines set by the KZN Wildlife.
- The management of the progeny of the various felines to ensure the sustainable viability of the centre and the release of surplus stock into the wild environment of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park and the greater Zululand area.
- The management of the progeny of the various felines to ensure the sustainable viability of the centre and the release of surplus stock into the wild environment. Release of surplus stock to be in conformance with the direction of KZN Wildlife.
- To attract the local community and tourists to the centre for wildlife awareness and educational purposes.
- The centre will be dedicated to providing visitors with quality service and information.

### BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The Emdoneni Cat Rehabilitation project began in 1994 when we, with the aid of the (then) KZN Wildlife took over 3 cheetah that were in need of a home. Later on we took in orphaned baby serval rescued from pineapple farmers and helped to raise them. Today we have four cat species at the project and are limited to these species and a maximum number of cats that we can hold in accordance with permits issued by conservation authorities.

Another condition of the project permit is that no animal is permitted to be taken from the wild for captivity purposes. In the event of wild animals being brought into our care, they are to be released as soon as they are fit. That is why you will not see any cats at the project that are 'fence runners' when people are near. All the cats that we keep at the project have either been born and raised here, or purchased from other breeding stations/projects in the country.

As our permits specify the maximum numbers of each species which we can keep, all additional cats/kittens are raised and released at the age of around one year, provided they are healthy and capable of fending for themselves in the wild. To date we have released a number of serval and caracal into the wild.

### RECENT CAT RELEASES

From 1997 to current the following numbers were released back into the wild:

- 14 servals;
- 11 caracals, and
- 2 African Wildcats

We purchase our Cheetah from other centres at an average price of between R85 000,00 – R130 000,00 each.

The reason that we have not been successful with releasing cheetah back into the wild is that we have never had



enough cheetah to breed with. During the last 6 years we had to procure 4 males and 2 females at very high costs from other major centres in SA. These animals were procured at a very young age which brought our total up to 6 cheetah. We were hoping to have a better chance of breeding with them. It takes a cheetah 3.5 years to sexually mature. In 2013 all our cheetah were mature enough to start breeding.

After years of no success, tests were done by Dr Mark Toft, well known SA Wild Vet, and we discovered that two of our males are sterile but the other two males have a fairly good chance to breed. We bought our youngest female from a very well-known centre (Kapama) and hopefully she will be producing soon.

Our other female is 10 years old and will not be able to breed. We bought her from a local breeder but on her arrival we noticed that she was very weak. After running some tests, we realised that she will never be able to go back to the wild. It took us years to get her sorted and she is now happy and content.

Releasing of cheetah will only take place when they have bred successfully and this will be done in co-operation with EKZN Wildlife. It is extremely difficult to breed with captive cheetah.

We include these references to clarify some misconceptions that the Cat Project is a profitable business.



# iSimangaliso welcomes servals

PHOTOS: CENESEA STORK

## Cenessa Stork

TWO new servals were introduced to the iSimangaliso Wetland Park last Friday.

At first not wanting to put their best paw forward, both cats at first refused to leave the safety of their crates.

Eventually, however, when prompted, they shot out of the crates like cats out of hell and within seconds disappeared into the grassland.

The adult female and young male were confiscated from a farmer in Vryheid who kept them in captivity illegally, apparently to be used for hunting purposes.

According to the farmer they were found in snares, but on investigation, no marks were found on their bodies to support the claim.

They were recovered by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife District Conservation Officers and taken to the Emdoneni Animal Care and Rehabilitation Centre near Hluhluwe.

The cats were set free in the open grassland area in the Eastern Shores side of the park, a suitable habitat and where plenty of prey is available.

Servals eat mainly rodents, fish, birds, insects and small reptiles which are found in abundance in natural wetland areas.

On a previous occasion Servals were released in the Western Shores side of the park.

In the 18 years Emdoneni has been in operation, they successfully rehabilitated

and released cheetahs, servals, caracals and an African Wild Cat.

'We are delighted to accept the two new servals and play our part in ensuring the conservation of this rare and beautiful species.'

'iSimangaliso provides them with a secure home away from inhabited areas and the threat of snaring,' says iSimangaliso Wetland Park CEO, Andrew Zaloumis.

Servals are listed on the 'Threatened or Protected Species' (TOPS) list owing to their rarity.

'They are vulnerable to being snared and killed by farmers, in particular for their beautiful pelts,' says Emdoneni owner Cecilie Nel.



Once prompted by Emdoneni owner Louis Nel, the female serval shot out of the crate and ran for cover under nearby trees

Projects such as ours at Emdoneni cost a lot to run and do not enjoy government subsidies or large corporate sponsorship like some of the bigger centres.

It does not help that Cheetah are notoriously difficult breeders, especially in captivity. Only the young animals can be re-integrated into the wild, as the adult animals are often tame, and thus can pose a threat to humans if released, or are themselves threatened by the fact that humans are more likely to hunt or capture tame animals.

We trust that this helps clear up some questions as to why the cats at Emdoneni seem to stay here for a long time. It is sadly not always possible to release tame animals back into the wild, as they would not cope and probably perish fairly quickly. Since the cats are mostly threatened species, trying to breed them in captivity and then releasing the young, is the only viable option available to a small project such as ours. Although small, we do believe that we make a difference, with your valued support!

We encourage all supporters to help spread the word about how the project operates to clear up the questions that can arise from a lack of understanding of the complexities that we need to deal with. If in doubt, give us a call and we will provide the necessary information.

## COMMENTS FROM SUCCESSFUL RELEASES

"It was a great privilege to receive four (4) caracal from the Emdoneni Cat Project and being able to release them on my game ranch. We saw individuals still up to a month after the release and one was challenging a nyala close to our camp." By Dr Mark Sutherland

"Mkuze Falls is known for the Big 5 and after introducing serval cats back into our wetland area, this has become a huge attraction for our guests to witness also the smaller cats in the area. Caracal occurs naturally at Mkuze Falls, but, with the introduction of 2 female servals from Emdoneni, our sightings are more regular and guests are thrilled when they see them in their natural environment." General Manager, Mkuze Falls

"We are delighted to play our part in supporting an organisation like Emdoneni Animal Care and Rehabilitation Centre in ensuring the conservation and protection of this rare and beautiful species. The Eastern Shores of iSimangaliso's Lake St Lucia provides them with a wild, secure home away from inhabited areas and the threat of snaring" Andrew Zaloumis, iSimangaliso CEO

Ms F Douvere (UNESCO) and Mr S Zikalala (KZN ANC Sec Gen) released the serval. Mr Zikalala, commented that "This is very good work that iSimangaliso is doing in terms of conserving nature and animals. We also support UNESCO's efforts in South Africa and this contribution to development which is part of our strategic goals. I'm very proud to be associated with this world heritage site," he said.



Caracal being released at iSimangaliso Lake St Lucia.

Emdoneni has enjoyed success with both serval and caracal releases back into the wild