



KwaZulu-Natal Wild Dog Project

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The black nose pressed against the mesh of the viewing hole in the transport crate as the inquisitive, dark eyes scanned the attendant readying the diesel pump. The pump attendant's curiosity was getting the better of him, but he was nervous about not being able to make out what the eyes belonged to. An extra rope was strapped over the crates in anticipation of the jarring dirt road ahead. The two Land Rover Defenders, each with two wooden crates on the back, were transporting a fresh start for Wild Dog conservation in Mkhuze Game Reserve (MGR) of Isimangaliso Wetland Park. Each crate contained a male Wild Dog born at De Wildt Cheetah Wildlife Centre near Hartebeespoort Dam, experiencing for the first time life beyond their familiar enclosures. Un-sedated or tranquilized, the animals were still relaxed enough with crate-class travel to sleep for most of the journey.

Later the following morning the four dogs started to negotiate the fresh impala carcass left for them and appeared to be healthy but watchful in their new surroundings. It will be a steep learning curve for the dogs that have never had to defend a kill against vultures and potentially lethal scavengers like Spotted Hyaenas. For now they will only have to negotiate vultures that drop in to feed on the fresh carcasses delivered; but in time the security of a boma will no longer be an option. Reintroductions of Wild Dogs throughout South Africa have had mixed success over the years and MGR is no exception.

In years following a previous Wild Dog reintroduction into the 40 000ha MGR several key animals were lost to snaring, several dogs died of natural causes through injury or in conflict with Spotted Hyaenas, while six yearling single-sex dispersal animals displayed natural dispersal behaviour by splintering from the core pack and leaving the reserve. As a result of these events, despite a successful breeding season in 2006, vital annual breeding cycles required to sustain the population were interrupted. It is intended that this new introduction, and later that of a second pack, combined with intensive monitoring to limit human induced catastrophic events for the packs, will be the start of a consistently productive, persistent Wild Dog population in MGR.



To give the males the best chance of success, and to ensure that a functional breeding pack, capable of hunting successfully is developed, wild caught females will need to be sourced and bonded with the males in a boma environment. While the instinct to hunt is inherent in the Wild Dogs, the skills developed and refined through years of hunting are critical. Research also shows that the complexities of trying to mix unrelated individuals of the same sex are a significant dilemma and have in past attempts led to dogs killing each other or packs splitting once released. So the chances of successfully bonding these males born in 2004 to another existing pack with males are slim at best; hence the need for females exclusively. Until the females are sourced, the Wild Dogs will have time and plenty of opportunity to learn how to fend off those vultures!

A few hours later with dusk rapidly turning to night, the vehicles drove past the small, silent crowd and into the newly completed holding boma. The headlamps pierced the dark to illuminate the grass ahead. With crates offloaded and standing side-by-side, the wooden doors were slid up and the Wild Dogs loped off hesitantly into the cover of the grassy shadows. One remained in its crate, surveying the scene with caution, before slinking out to the left, past bushes and into the darkness.

The project to expand and understand the current range of Wild Dogs through the diverse landscape of northern KwaZulu-Natal is carried out through a partnership between the Endangered Wildlife Trusts' Carnivore Conservation Group and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife; supported by Wildlands Conservation Trust and Land Rover South Africa, and in collaboration with The Smithsonian Institution.