

MY FORTY-TWO YEARS IN CHEETAH AND WILD DOG CONSERVATION



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*An account of achievements over more than four decades in
cheetah and wild dog conservation
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1971–2013*

THE ANATOLIAN SHEPHERD DOG PROGRAMME



Anatolian dogs watch over their goats

This programme was started as a method of non-lethal predator control. It was first introduced in Namibia by Dr Laurie Marker, founder and director of the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), to protect domestic flocks of sheep from free-roaming predators. Later the method was introduced in South Africa by Annie Beckhelling, founder and director of Cheetah Outreach in the Western Cape.

In southern Africa it was common practice for livestock owners to set traps for predators, use poison or hunt them with domestic dogs. These methods naturally resulted in cruel and brutal injuries to not only the predators but also many other species of harmless wildlife, especially the aardvark, aardwolf, bat-eared fox, honey badger, genet, mongoose, vultures and raptors.

The Anatolian shepherd dog, a 6 000-year-old Turkish breed, was originally raised and trained to protect livestock from bears and wolves. At the age of 6 weeks an Anatolian puppy is placed permanently with a goat or sheep herd. With little human contact, but under the watchful eye of the farmer, the dog grows up and is bonded with its herd. On reaching maturity it acts as a member of the herd and attacks or chases off predators.

Soon after the dogs were introduced to local farms, there was a marked drop in livestock losses and satisfied farmers endorsed the programme. The Centre continues to partner Cheetah Outreach and their efforts to introduce this breed to farms in South Africa. As part of the Centre's education programme, children are introduced to tame Anatolian dogs used to human contact – often a unique experience in rural and disadvantaged communities.

I wish to thank Annie Beckhelling for her continued support and congratulate her on the success she has had with the Anatolian project. Deon Cilliers, her new manager for the northern regions, has been associated with the Centre for many years.

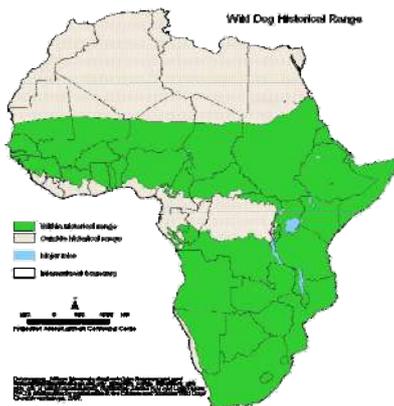


On the verge of extinction

WILD DOG CONSERVATION (1978–2012)

The Anatolian Shepherd Dog Programme has aided cheetah preservation in South Africa, and to a far lesser extent it has also helped with conserving the African wild dog (*Lycaon pictus*). Seldom tolerated by game farmers, wild dogs are regarded as cruel, ruthless and callous killers and often shot on sight. The species is nomadic and requires a regular supply of water and a huge range in which to roam. Their large packs of up to 40 in number, hunt food at least once, sometimes twice, a day. As a result, apart from large protected reserves such as the Kruger National Park, today there are few areas remaining that are suitable for them. With ever-dwindling numbers, they are rarely seen in the wild. What is the future of the fast-vanishing species?

DISTRIBUTION, PAST AND PRESENT



Before 1900



In the 21st century

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, this much maligned yet fascinating animal, also known as the 'painted wolf' or 'Cape hunting dog', was found on African plains in large numbers. By 1930, however, their numbers had dropped dramatically and by 2002 the IUCN Red Data Book for Mammals of South Africa, classified the wild dog as an endangered species. Apart from deliberate extermination, the dog's susceptibility to rabies and distemper had further reduced its numbers.

BREEDING PROGRAMME AT DE WILDT

In 1978 the Centre saw the arrival of 6 wild dog pups from Namibia. They had been donated to the National Zoo in Pretoria by the Department of Agriculture and Nature Conservation of Namibia. They were caught as free-roaming animals on a private game farm outside the Etosha National Park. After shooting the adults the owner took the pups to the Ecological Institute at Okaukuejo. It was planned to release the 6 in Etosha once they could fend for themselves, but later it was decided that the pack was related and too small in number to survive. Thus began the wild dog breeding programme at the Centre.

Thereafter, the Zoo sent to us the many unwanted wild dog pups it received from angry farmers; they had been sent from as far afield as today's provinces of Mpumalanga, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal, as well as from Botswana and Angola. Using microchips, the animals were numbered and recorded and family trees were selected so as to establish a healthy heterozygous population at the Centre. Unlike the cheetah, procreation of the wild dog was not a problem.

A large enclosure was now needed in which to observe the behaviour of the dogs in captivity and to expose the endangered and much maligned predator to the public.

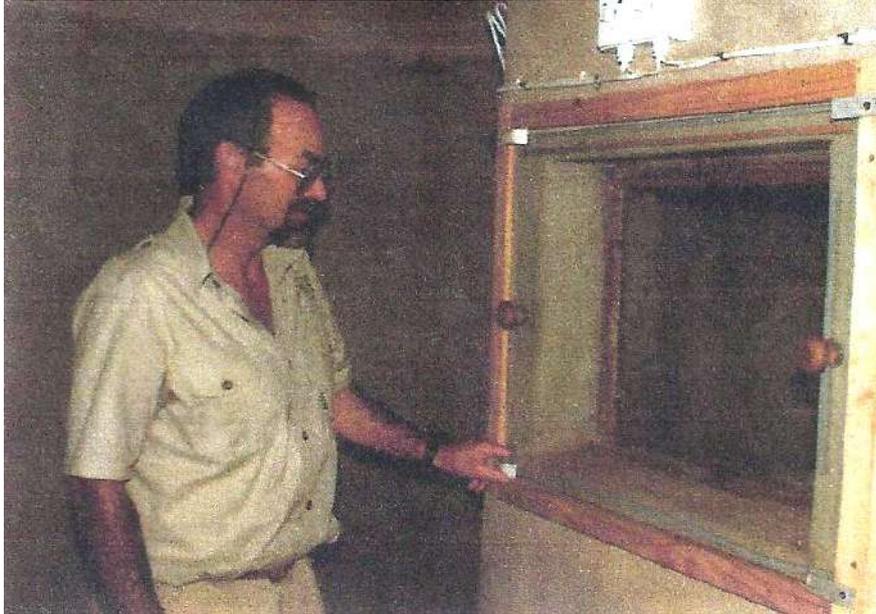
1995 THE SASOL CAMP

With its slogan 'Protecting the environment is an obligation not a choice', SASOL (South Africa's unique oil-from-coal petroleum company) was then actively involved in wildlife preservation and environmental projects, and on a number of occasions had identified itself with the plight of the endangered wild dog. In 1994, through SASOL's chief executive officer, Mr Jan Fourie, a partnership between SASOL and the Centre developed which allowed us to achieve significant success with wild dog breeding and release programmes.

I shall always be extremely grateful to SASOL for their continued support. With its first financial donation in 1994 we built at the Centre the 5-hectare drive-through SASOL Camp and SASOL Den. In the large enclosure we would closely observe the behaviour and interaction of the dogs in captive conditions, while in the sunken den we would view the first sightings of the birth of wild dog pups.

Public tours still operate by driving through wild dog enclosures and breeding camps, its guides providing information that attempts to change the negative perceptions that humans have towards wild dogs. Traditionally seen as brutal and indifferent killers, the wild dog is shunned because it attacks and disembowels its live prey – its killing method actually taking only a few minutes. However, our guides explain, a lion may take 2 hours to kill a large mammal like a buffalo. Today, 30 years later, we are gratified to learn that many visitors make the journey to De Wildt specifically to see the 'painted wolves'. As with the cheetah, a great deal of research has been done on wild dogs at the Centre, and will hopefully continue, in order to benefit the long-term survival of the species.





Alan Strachan (animal manager) observing mother and pups in den

Wild dogs are seasonal breeders, producing pups in the autumn. Under natural conditions, on reaching parturition the female will dig a deep den and give birth to her litter underground. Until 1994, very seldom (if ever) had the birth of wild dogs been observed or recorded.

After completing the large enclosure, and with the enthusiastic support of Mr Jan Fourie, SASOL provided an innovative den, 3 square metres in extent. There were steps under shelter that led down to an underground tunnel 12 metres long, which in turn led to an observation area with a one-way glassed window adjoining the maternity section. From here the birth and early days of the pups could be observed, and we were soon rewarded with the first ever sighting of the birth of 14 wild dogs. A TV monitor in the den meant that on-screen we could watch progress in the den. The loss of 4 puppies just after birth confirmed that wild dogs have large litters but only the strong pups survive; we witnessed too that from birth the youngsters fought for dominance and there was no place among them for weaklings.



Wild dog bitch with pups

1995 RELEASE OF CAPTIVE-BORN AND WILD-CAUGHT WILD DOGS (3 MALES AND 3 FEMALES) ON MADIKWE GAME RESERVE

Can captive-born wild dogs adapt to the natural environment? As with the cheetah, this was a question that needed an answer.

In the 1980s, the National Zoological Gardens donated to the Natal Parks Board a pair of 4-year-old captive-born wild dogs and 8 puppies from the Centre. The 10 were bonded with a further 6 wild-caught pups received from a game farmer in the Eastern Transvaal. The pack was held in a boma for 3 weeks after which they were released into the Hluhluwe Game Reserve. Although not monitored, they were seen on a regular basis.

In 1995, against a backdrop of criticism from many wildlife experts, the first reliable and convincing trial of an experimental wild dog release took place at Madikwe Game Reserve – then a newly established 60 000 hectare reserve in the North West. To start, 3 wild-caught male dogs, that had strayed from the security of the Kruger National Park, were held in the reserve in a boma. At the Centre 3 captive-born wild dog sisters (southern strain) were selected from the SASOL pack; one was fitted with a Telonics UHF radio transmitter collar, and the other 2 each had a miniature radio transmitter implanted in their abdominal cavities. On 2 January 1995, the females were introduced to the males in their Madikwe boma, and 6 months later the 6 dogs were released as a bonded group into the reserve – an area where they had been extinct for more than half a century.

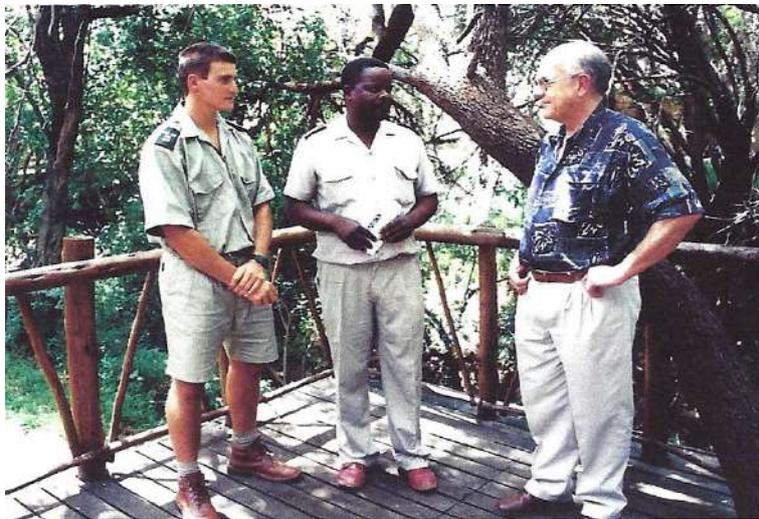


Madikwe Game Reserve: released group of 6 wild dogs (3 captive-born)

The dogs were closely monitored by Dr Markus Hofmeyr, then field ecologist at Madikwe. Later he reported: 'They were actively killing within 5 days –they never looked weak – and the captive-bred females were leading the pack, so the instinct to hunt was there.'

The captive-born females calmed the males, allowing the pack to be seen by visitors. In turn, the wild-caught males warned their mates of the dangers of the wild. During the first month, while they were busy establishing which of the 6 would be the dominant male and female, the pack roamed over most of Madikwe.

The following year all 3 females came into season. Markus observed that the males fought continually to mate with the females – this was unexpected as it was believed that only the dominant pair mated. Later, in 2005, an MSc student of Professor Henk Bertschinger (Charlotte Mouiex) confirmed multiple paternity in both Madikwe and Pilanesberg's African wild dogs. The study was once again sponsored by SASOL.



Dr. Markus Hofmeyr, the Madikwe chief ranger and Mr. Jan Fourie discuss the wild dog project



Captive-born Floppy Ear, leader of the pack, with her 2 siblings

Then the project took a downturn. Rabies, brought onto the reserve by jackals, decimated the pack. The response was to begin researching an oral vaccine and this was done at the Centre under the supervision of veterinarians Professor Joe van Heerden and Dr. Richard Burroughs. Generously sponsored by SASOL, quarantine camps were erected so that dogs could be monitored and the strength and efficiency of the then current rabies and distemper vaccines could be assessed. Now critics were even louder in their accusations and a rumour was circulated that the deaths of the dogs were due to inbreeding.

To confirm that this was not the case, Professor Henk Bertchinger (once again sponsored by SASOL) sent blood samples from all our wild dogs to Dr. Claude Schelling at the genetics department of the Swiss Federal Institute for Technology in Zurich, Switzerland, and he proved conclusively that our dogs were heterozygous and unrelated.

Following the initial setbacks at Madikwe, SASOL enabled the Centre to further the cause of the wild dog with the erection of quarantine camps where free-roaming wild dogs sent to the Centre could be tested for possible diseases. In 1997 a second and this time successful release, consisting of 2 wild-caught males and 3 captive-born females, took place at Madikwe. As a security, the dogs were vaccinated annually for rabies and canine distemper.

In 1999, once again we were successful in releasing our captive born wild dogs of the one sex with wild caught of the other. In collaboration with the Wild Dog Action Group, a pack of 10 wild dogs (3 captive born females, 2 wild caught adult males together with 5 puppies) were successfully released in the Venetia Limpopo Nature Reserve. Thereafter, Harriet Davies and her assistants of the WAG group recorded the pack's movements.



Dr. Markus Hofmeyr assisted by a Conservation official placing a collar on a wild dog before its Venetia Limpopo Nature Reserve release

But the fact still remains that wild dogs have large litters, breed easily and require food daily, and so they remain largely unwanted animals. Over the years, many such dogs have been sent from all over South Africa to the Centre, the gene diversity allowing us to establish strong unrelated breeding lines. Nowadays the Centre sees its role as one of sustaining these breeding lines and supplying unrelated pairs for release in suitable areas or sending them to reputable zoos and game parks.