



HESC releases two captive-bred cheetahs to the wild



The Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre (HESC) released two male cheetahs, Wim and Tobie, at the Air Force Base Makhado (formerly known as Air Force Base Louis Trichardt) on 2 December 2015.

Captive born Wim, six years old, and Tobie, seven years old, were donated to the Air Force Base to keep the runways clear of small game to ensure a safe landing environment for the 2 Squadron Gripen fighter planes based there. The Air Force Base is situated in a remote wilderness area of close on 3 000 ha where animals roam free, resulting in small game such as warthogs, impala, duiker and steenbuck on the runways jeopardising the safety of aircraft landing.

Lente Roode, founder of the HESC, says the release and similar successful releases in the past, dispels the myth that cheetahs born in captivity cannot be released into the wild to hunt for themselves. She says while much of the work of the HESC is focused on breeding cheetahs and creating a large and healthy genetic pool to sustain the species, the release of cheetah into the wild remains the ultimate objective and measure of success.



The cheetahs were lured from the holding area with a warthog carcass, but a sizeable media and air force base contingent resulted in them grabbing the carcass and retreating to the area where they spent six weeks acclimatising to their new home.

The release of the sleek predators was the culmination of weeks of preparation for the day. Wim and Tobie were each fitted with GPS collars at HESC on 17 October 2015 to enable the tracking of the pair's movements once they were released at the Air Force Base. On 20 October 2015 they were transported to the Air Force Base and released into the large holding area adjacent to the runways for a period of acclimatisation, particularly to become habituated to the sound of aircraft.



Commenting on the value of the cheetahs to the Air Force Base Makhado, Lieutenant Colonel Etienne van Blerk says the use of cheetahs to hunt small game on the airstrips is a unique method of clearing the runways and above all, a natural and sustainable means of ensuring the safety of the area.

The Hoedspruit cheetahs were released just days before International Cheetah Day, designated annually on 4 December to celebrate the world's fastest feline and to generate awareness for the cheetah. With fewer than 10 000 remaining in the wild, the cheetah is sadly Africa's most endangered big cat. However, the good news is in South Africa the cheetah is no longer classified as endangered, but as vulnerable.

For further information, or to get involved, please contact **Mari Theunissen**:

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Notes for editors:

Why male captive-born cheetahs?

1. Being used to human contact makes for a more manageable dynamic, taking into account the number of people landing and taking off from the Airfield every day.
2. A cheetah is the best possible predator, as lions are very big and pose a greater threat to people, while leopards are skittish and would probably move away from the area in search of solitude.
3. Female cheetahs are solitary animals. Should they make a kill around the airstrip, they will only consume half a carcass and subsequently lure vultures to the area, which can be an even bigger threat to incoming aircraft.
4. Male cheetahs form coalitions of two to five animals. Releasing two male cheetahs which have already bonded is the ideal solution. These animals will not move too far away from humans (nor will they threaten their safety), they will hunt efficiently ensuring management of animal species on the runway, and will quickly clear a carcass without attracting vultures.
5. This model has proven successful in the past, as two male cheetahs (and subsequently a third) were previously released onto the Air Force Base Makhado. These cats survived naturally for a number of years, while achieving the safety objectives leading to their release.

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