



MEDIA RELEASE

Sunday 31st March 2024

AUSTRALIAN FIRST: Cheetah returns to the wild in Africa

- **Edie, born at the Wild Cat Conservation Centre in 2022 is the first ever Australian born cheetah to be returned to Africa.**
- **The return is in partnership with WeWild Africa, The Metapopulation Initiative and Mziki Private Game Reserve**

The Wild Cat Conservation Centre in Sydney is the first organisation in Australia to return a captive born cheetah back to the wilds of Africa.

Edie has undergone a phased return to the wild, with plans carefully laid to ensure success. She began her preparations at the Wild Cat Conservation Centre, undergoing fitness development, changes to her diet and given help to hone her predatory skills. Once on African soil, she began her second phase, adjusting to changes in climate and prey, transferring to various sized bomas at each new milestone. This phased rewilding allowed for Edie's wild instincts to sharpen, improve her hunting skills to bring down predator-aware prey animals and develop her vigilance to co-exist with competing predators.

Wild Cat Conservation Centre Founder, Ben Britton, says "This is the culmination of 8 years of hard work and dedication. Since the inception of the centre 8 years ago, our goal has always been to return cats back to the wild. The cheetah we originally brought to Australia were DNA tested to ensure not only were they as varied as possible though that their genetics were suitable for any progeny to return to Africa. With our insurance population here in Australia helping to safeguard the long term future of Africa's remaining cheetah population."

"The birth of Edie, and her brother Dakari, in September last year was a key moment for the program. Not only were they the first cheetah to ever be bred in Sydney though we knew then we had the opportunity to use their crucial genetic make up for long term species longevity" he continued.

Reintroduction to the wild is a significant milestone, and one that has been dreamt of since the inception of the Wild Cat Conservation Centre 8 years ago. The design of the centre in Wilberforce, was always with the intention of rewilding cats. The inclusion of the savanna which is the largest cheetah habitat in Australia, limited public visitation, mother raised cubs, has all been with the sole intention of participation in an international rewilding program.

The rewilding of Edie would not have been possible without the support and partnership of WeWild Africa, The Metapopulation Initiative and Mziki Private Game Reserve.

WeWild Africa are vital partners in the cheetah metapopulation project, providing vital funding and assistance in the post-release tracking and monitoring of Edie. Edie has been fitted with a satellite collar so she can be monitored 24/7 by the conservation team. Dereck Milburn is the WeWild Africa Project Director and has been involved in wildlife conservation in Africa for over 20 years. “The cheetah from Australia is the first cheetah ever brought back from Australia and that in itself is a historic occasion and a monumental achievement. And as an organization we're very proud to be associated with the process. Wild Cat Conservation Centre in Australia has been relentless in the pursuit of getting this cheetah back to Africa and without organizations like Wild Cat Conservation Centre, these projects simply wouldn't happen.”

“I've got no doubt that Edie is going to make a significant impact in South Africa. From a genetic point of view, it's critical. You know, these projects are critical and it's proving that it is possible.”

Cheetah Metapopulation Project Manager, Donovan De Swardt said of the project “Captive cheetah possess alleles that are not represented in the free-ranging cheetah population. For this reason, cheetah such as Edie become vital additions to the metapopulation as a source of unrelated genetics for infusion into the project”.

Edie has been released into Mziki Private Game Reserve in South Africa where she will participate in the wider Cheetah Metapopulation Project.

Philip Pallamar, Director of Mziki “You know, it's quite a surreal moment because it's been in the works for quite a few years and to see our first predator on the reserve and that being the cheetah and especially Edie is absolutely surreal and amazing.”

“Edie marks the first real circle of life closing on the reserve from an eco-perspective, and she opens the door to a lot of conservation and research that we will be doing going into the future on the Reserve.”

The hope is that Edie will be the first of a number of cheetah that the Wild Cat Conservation Centre in Sydney can return to Africa and help to secure a future for this amazing species.

Wild Cat Conservation Centre: Established in 2016, the Wild Cat Conservation Centre, located in Sydney Australia, is a pioneering entity in understanding and protecting smaller wild cat species. The centre focuses on conservation efforts on wild cats from around the globe. Notably, the centre runs the only conservation breeding program for Clouded Leopards and Cheetahs in Sydney.

WeWild Africa: Founded in 2019 by veteran conservation experts with decades of experience in wildlife conservation in Africa. Having worked in some of the most challenging places and situations in the world, WeWild Africa engages with a diverse range of stakeholders, bridging the gap and providing essential skills, capacity, and resources to partners in conservation in need – putting the wellbeing of animals first, always. WeWild Africa is on the forefront of rewilding captive cheetah and have implemented numerous successful releases.

The Cheetah Metapopulation Initiative: In the last century, wild cheetahs have undergone a drastic reduction in global geographic range and population size. Complementary to state owned protected areas, many private land conservation areas have been set aside in Southern Africa to conserve biodiversity. Barriers (fences) protect cheetahs and other wild animals from the increasing threats of humanity and agriculture but restrict wildlife movement. By coordinating translocations between participating reserves, The Metapopulation Initiative helps private and state wildlife custodians manage inbreeding, overpopulation, and local extinction on their lands while identifying new areas of suitable cheetah habitat for reintroduction.

Mziki Private Game Reserve: Mziki Private Nature Reserve is over 6,000 ha of beautiful, varied and relatively undisturbed Sandy Bushveld on the Hex River 23 km southeast of the Pilanesberg National Park. Mziki is part of the larger Vaalkop Nature Reserve with potential for joining fenced reserves into larger units. The reserve lends itself to rewilding of cheetah due to its size and the absence of large predators such as lion and hyena, with a low leopard density.

About Cheetah

- Cheetah is a vulnerable species. It is estimated that fewer than 7,000 mature individuals remain in the wild.
- In the last century we have lost 90% of the wild cheetah population.
- They suffer from habitat loss, human-wildlife conflict and poaching.

NOTE: No crews will be given access to the centre to photograph or capture additional footage.

Media Inquiries

Manuela Pallamar

manuela.pallamar@mziki.co.za