

Intensive breeding of rare game species

Gert Fourie

G&H: *Does the intensive breeding of game on game farms contribute to the protection and conservation of these species?*

Jacques Malan: Definitely. An example is the cheetah that previously was seriously threatened and now intensive breeding projects at breeding stations like De Wildt have contributed to the conservation of this species. Similarly, the game farmer can contribute to some of the rare antelope and other species by implementing intensive breeding projects with these animals.

It is important for breeders to realise that animals that have been raised and kept in breeding camps should be gradually adapted to extensive conditions and not merely released on extensive systems.

I have successfully released animals, which originated from overseas zoos, into wild areas and these animals adapted without any problems.

Biodiversity Management official: I don't think intensive breeding projects contribute to the conservation of, for example, roan and sable antelope. Except for the fact that the IUCN does not recognise animals bred in intensive breeding systems, it is possible that a weaker animal is bred in these systems. It may be possible that the accumulative effect over a few generations of animals that lose their resistance to diseases and parasites, changes social behaviour and even the ability to avoid predators will influence the population negatively, rather than contribute to the conservation of a species.

Furthermore, game farmers can more effectively contribute to these species by improving and creating better habitat conditions instead of trying to contribute to the numbers of animals.

Most of the protected game species are not critically endangered and therefore there is no need for intensive breeding projects to increase numbers.



A protected animal is defined as an animal of which the population size has diminished to such an extent that there is a potential threat to the future occurrence of the species. Conservation authorities have a primary responsibility of protecting our biodiversity and natural ecosystems in South Africa. Game farmers have a similar responsibility, but with an additional requirement – conserving biodiversity in a financially viable way. After all, it is the vehicles with branding of lodges or game farms on the side doors, which have bumper stickers that read, “Conservation through utilization”.

Hundreds and hundreds of game, such as sable antelope, roan antelope and tsessebe, are bred in areas that are relatively smaller than their natural habitat size in the wild.

These smaller areas can be described as intensive breeding systems, where the animals kept in this area are dependent on the land owner for food and water (even shelter) to survive.

Breeders take good care of these animals – they do cost more than an arm and a leg. By ensuring that animals are optimally fed, protected from predators, treated against parasites and closely monitored, a reasonable return on the initial investment is ensured.

Despite the high numbers of animals in breeding camps, the IUCN does not recognise the animals in intensive breeding systems as part of the natural (or meta) population and this attributes to the ongoing classification of most of these species as protected animals.

In this issue, we present interviews with various role-players in the game breeding industry. Our panel consists of: Jacques Malan, businessman and rare game species breeder in the Limpopo province; and an anonymous official at Biodiversity Management, Limpopo Province Department of Economic Development, Environment & Tourism .

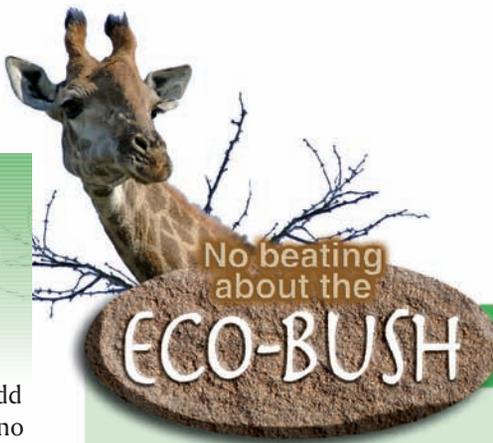
G&H: Do you think that the game farmers/breeders are acting responsibly according to the guidelines set by conservation authorities?

Jacques Malan: Yes, the majority do. I must add that guidelines are very old and furthermore no national guideline has been presented in the past. It is time for a national guideline and the landowner/game farmer should contribute to the formulation of this guideline. Some of the provincial guidelines are ridiculous, for example the size of a breeding camp is used as a criterion for approving/disapproving an application for keeping of specific species. My question is: How can one compare 200 ha in the Messina dry bushveld with 200 ha on the Springbok flats, with a higher rainfall and fertile soils?

Authorities may reject an application for a 100-ha camp on the Springbok flats that may in fact be a self-sustainable, extensive system, and approve a 400-ha breeding camp in a very dry area where animals need to be fed to survive (according to my terminology, as soon as an animal is dependent on man to survive, this situation can be described as an intensive breeding system).

Carrying capacity, rather than size should be used as a guideline for minimum size of camps.

Biodiversity Management official: Although I'm not involved in wildlife trade and regulations I do think that game breeders breed with these species for financial reasons. Our regulations are not formulated to optimise the financial benefits to the land owner/breeder, but to conserve the species. I also believe that game breeders will do what they deem necessary to optimise reproduction, even if it means doing things that are contrary to the guidelines set by authorities.



Comment

Gert Fourie comments: The kudu is most probably one of the most hunted animals in the world and, despite this fact, it is one of the most common and least-threatened game species. Since these animals are very sought after by landowners and hunters alike, the impala has financial value and is often used as a good example of conservation through utilisation.

Can the same principle be applied to our threatened game species? Of course, there is no doubt that the economic or utilisation value of a threatened animal may ultimately contribute to its conservation status. However, the kudu has never been bred under intensive breeding conditions on a large scale and it is only a valid question to ask whether long-term intensive breeding conditions may weaken the gene pool.

A very low percentage of breeding animals originating from intensive breeding systems

are rehabilitated and released on extensively large areas where natural selection of weaker animals can occur. Maybe guidelines should rather focus on the regular release of animals on extensive farms than restricting the specific breeding conditions. It is imperative that conservation bodies, together with breeders, should be involved in the process of developing national guidelines, since a high percentage of protected species is found under relatively intensive or semi-intensive breeding conditions.

Furthermore, it is clear that one of the main reasons for low numbers in certain animal species is a lack of suitable habitat for these animals. Poor and transformed habitat due to previous mismanagement of land is common in South Africa and rehabilitation of these areas should become one of the main objectives of the serious and responsible land owner. 

For more information or assistance with habitat evaluation for rare game species, rehabilitation of habitat and assistance with applications, contact Gert or Nanette Fourie (Ekofocus) at 082 9295277.