

MONUMENTAL STRIDES

Conservation and Education
at
Harnas Wildlife Foundation



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Harnas is a place where people fight for the lives of animals, with the main aim to protect and save those animals that could never speak for themselves. Harnas functions as a sustainable nature reserve where species can be released; it also functions as a temporary reception centre and recovery station for all types of animals.

Harnas was born out of a love for animals, where Marieta van der Merwe became the cornerstone of Harnas Wildlife

foundation. Over the past thirty years, lions, leopards, cheetahs, wild dogs and even the smallest surrogate have made Harnas their home after being neglected, abused or abandoned.

As the Harnas name started growing, more and more people learned about the place and what is being done there, Harnas received more requests from the farmers, begging them to help in the constant conflict with problem predators feeding on their livestock; sheep, goats and other farm animals. The farmers do not wish to kill them, but often they see no other

alternative. When these animals are retrieved by Harnas, they promptly create an understanding between the farmers and locals, whereby they receive full support in assistance with capturing more of these predators that become a problem. In order to take on these challenges, Harnas has to have a basic mission and a vision: A "Harnas" is a protective breastplate worn into battle, and it is a symbol for the mission of Harnas: to protect an environment that includes all forms of life, ensuring endurance and sustainability.

In 2009 they founded their own research department with the aim to protect wildlife, through the knowledge that that ensures sustainability. The biggest hardships were investing time, money and research into the animals' rehabilitation and success, by finding suitable release sites and providing VHF/GPS collars for post release monitoring. Through the development of their Life Line project, a release programme for hand raised predators only, they have been successful in relocating cheetahs, jackals, caracals and wild dogs. All of the animals they have released into the Life Line programme have proven their ability to survive, without human interference; they have high expectations for the next chapter in their research release project.

The most comprehensive goal for the Life line project is to create a balanced and safe environment, consisting of 8,000 hectares, for the animals which are suitable to be released and to provide them with the opportunity to adapt to their natural, wild surroundings. The area works as a safety zone, where animals can freely roam without human disturbance. This non-interference contributes to the animal's skill and instinct development. Here they relearn to foresee dangers and read their surroundings. The life line is a soft release area and the last rehabilitation step towards release. If the animal managed to accomplish this final challenge, there is a good chance of survival in the wild. Should the animal that has been released, fail to adapt, they take it back to an area where they take care of it once again, in preparation for a second chance at release.

Each animal that is suitable for release will go through 3 stages of development. During the first stage, the animal is kept in an enclosure in close proximity to the farm. This ensures close observation, medical treatment where needed and feeding.

Once the animal is either old or strong enough to live in a more remote setting, the animal is relocated to a larger enclosure where contact with humans is reduced significantly. Not all animals are suited to be released in the wild. For this reason, Harnas is meticulous about identifying the suitable species and individuals to be released. The soft release programme starts during the second stage. This involves the animal spending their days in the Life Line where they can practice their hunting skills and learn to become self-sufficient, while still coming back to the safety of their enclosures at night.

The final stage is full release into the Life Line. During this stage, the animal is fully self-sufficient but still monitored by the Harnas research team. These animals have either a GPS or VHF collar, which is used to keep track of their movements. The release date is recorded for use in case studies for future use.





Harnas wild dog project: (*Lycaon pictus*)

The African wild dog is one of the most endangered predators in Africa. The indigenous animal's population have declined at such an alarming rate that there are only small populations left in only fourteen countries, where they have previously been present in thirty-nine. Of these fourteen countries, only six have populations of more than one hundred dogs.

Currently one of the few remaining populations of African wild dogs in Namibia is on Harnas. This population grew from various packs of wild juvenile and adult dogs. All of the dogs taken in by Harnas were very badly wounded. One dog's front leg was amputated. Another dog was badly cut in the neck, while another had a broken foot.

A second pack of juveniles came to Harnas from the Otjozondjupa region in 1996 and in 2008 two more packs joined, one also from the Otjozondjupa region and another from the Oshikoto region.

Harnas Wildlife Foundation recognizes the fact that the African wild dog is one of Namibia's most valuable assets, although re-establishing expatriated populations is one of the lower priorities of African wild dog conservation.

The African wild dogs can only be released into a network of small fenced reserves. These fenced sections would each support a few packs and allow them to re-establish themselves. In 2011, the first wild dog pack was released into the 8000 hectare Lifeline area at Harnas. Four dogs were released and are successfully hunting and sustaining themselves.

Harnas aim:

- To establish a source of African wild dogs for possible re-establishment into former ranges
- To provide a protective reserve in the event that African wild dog numbers decrease to critical levels
- To allow problem dogs to be moved to Harnas as a temporary facility for later relocation
- To generate baseline medical data, with emphasis on disease screening, vaccine testing, genetics, parasitology, morphometric and reproductive physiology.
- To initiate a population management programme for African wild dogs in Namibia, enabling a study of diet, predator/prey relations, prey selection, hunting success and interspecies competition.
- To generate income through low impact eco-tourism in order to sustain wildlife – especially the African wild dogs
- To sustain the use of wildlife, especially African wild dogs and other natural resources through income generating by low impact eco-tourism.



Cheetah decline

In the 1990s there were more than 100,000 cheetahs in 44 countries throughout Africa and Asia. Today the species is close to extinction. The massive decline in numbers was primarily due to loss of habitat, decline in prey species and conflict with livestock farmers. The cheetah's greatest hope for survival is anchored in Namibia and the Harnas conservation programme forms a critical part of this hope. Harnas has the ability, knowledge, equipment and passion to help create and establish safe zones to bring the cheetah's numbers back to an acceptable level.



At Harnas there are over 43 mammal species, thirteen bird species, and six reptile species. This represents a significant majority of the indigenous species in Namibia and places Harnas in a strong position to provide education through conservation to visitors at Harnas.

Harnas Wildlife Foundation has been in the forefront of nature conservation and rehabilitation in Namibia since the beginning of its existence in 1975. Their efforts in rescue, release and rehabilitation are of monumental importance. Conservation is not only a matter of trying to preserve; it is also about trying to counteract human damage.

Animal ambassadors

All animals at Harnas act as ambassadors for the wider animal kingdom. Through Harnas' volunteer programme, visitors to Harnas gain a strong understanding of the importance of all the animals – great and small. From the most magnificent lion to the smallest meercat, each animal at Harnas plays an important part in educating conservation enthusiasts and wildlife lovers.



Harnas currently runs an amazing VolunTourist programme. Here, volunteers have the opportunity to work with the animals – participating in feeding, caretaking, cleaning and rehabilitation as well as learn to track and monitor the released animals. Harnas gives you the opportunity to make a difference in all animals' lives, and provide the animals that cannot be released, with the best living conditions and care. Harnas believes that all animals are entitled to be put back in their natural habitat, where they can lead a free life. As a VolunTourist, you help to stabilize the animals and ensure their future success. This program also has unintended consequences; as one VolunTourist put it: "I wanted to learn more about the animals, but they taught me everything about myself."



Her name is Sofie!

They found her in a small village. About 2 months old and on a chain, she immediately bonded with a group of other teenager baboons in an enclosure, but she was always fearful of people. During the baboon walks, where we take the baboons out to explore nature, little Sofie was only two months old but already a loner. Other baboons would join the volunteers in taking a ride, sitting on their shoulders, grooming and even fall asleep with them. Sofie never ventured close to humans and only enjoyed the freedom in the bush.

Danielle visited Harnas sanctuary as a volunteer worker. She bonded with all animals but was afraid, even had a phobia for baboons. The unexpected happened while a group of volunteers including Danielle were walking the baboons. Suddenly a baboon panic started and all of the young baboons started

screaming, biting and fighting. To most of the volunteers this is normal but to Danielle this was a most dramatic and fearful experience. Within minutes everything was back to normal except that Sofie was up in a tree, afraid and confused while Danielle was sitting in a bundle and tears were flowing. She was more than ever convinced that baboons were not her favourite animals.

After a little while, Sofie climbed down from the tree, slowly walked to Danielle, put her arms around the sobbing girl and hugged her. In that moment the wonder of the word bonding was a reality for animal and human. Danielle extended her visit to Harnas and was found inside the baboon enclosure with Sofie every day. She even adopted Sofie as her little baboon. "A little baboon changed my life."

