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Cheetah roaming freely in UAE again

A three-year-old female cheetah named Safira has become the first predator to roam freely in the Arabian Wildlife Park on Sir Bani Yas Island.

The cheetah is one of four that have been kept in an enclosure in the park since last November. The six-month gap was necessary to allow the animal, which had lived in captivity at a local wildlife breeding centre all her life, to learn the skills necessary for survival in an environment that resembles life in the wild much more closely. Now Safira is free to wander the 41 square kilometres of the park, which is to open to visitors next year. "Once the cheetah is released it means that it is ready to be self-sufficient and hunt and feeds herself," said Lars Nielsen, marketing manager for the Desert Islands and a speaker for the project.

"She is now fully self-dependable, in excellent health and behaving as a wild cheetah should behave. We are monitoring her on a daily basis but are thrilled to see that she has taken to her new home so quickly." Cheetahs were once native to the region but the last of the local population was shot in Oman in 1977. Those now bred in the UAE are of a closely related subspecies, the north-eastern African *Acinonyx jubatus soemmerringii*.

Desert Islands is a project by the Tourism Development and Investment Company (TDIC), which is working to turn Abu Dhabi emirate into a major tourism attraction.

After being closed to the public for more than 20 years, Sir Bani Yas Island opened last year to guests of the five-star Desert Islands Resort and Spa. Located some 170 km west of the capital, it had been a private wildlife park for the late Sheikh Zayed, who wanted it to be a haven for rare species. The collection included 23 species of mammals as well as emu, ostrich and some native birds. Undisturbed by predators, the animals multiplied rapidly with the island's wildlife population reaching well over 25,000 creatures. Many have long disappeared from the wild including the scimitar-horned oryx, a former resident of the sub-deserts and grassland steppes in North and Central Africa, of which 3,750 used to live on the island.

At the end of last year, the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi and the TDIC started an operation to remove 20,000 animals from the island to a mainland reserve. The remaining animals, most of them species indigenous to the UAE such as the endangered Arabian oryx, will become the basis of the Arabian Wildlife Park. It is because of the cheetahs' appetite for other animals – gazelles, peacocks and other small prey – that they were brought over to Sir Bani Yas Island. "The cheetahs will act as the main predators in the

Arabian Wildlife Park, which will help in creating a unique ecosystem," said Mr Nielsen. "Predation by cheetahs will naturally control exponential growth of herbivore populations in the park. This is important to prevent overpopulation and the resulting detrimental effect on the vegetation and fragile nature of the desert environment."

While Safira is now hunting by herself within the park grounds, the other three animals – named Gibbs, Gabriel and Ella – are still relying on people to bring their food. Peafowl, guinea fowl and sand gazelle meat are all on the menu.

The two males, three-year-old brothers, are housed together. The 10-year-old female, Ella, is housed next door. They live within what TDIC calls the cheetah management camp, an area of approximately 24 hectares, where keepers are trying to rekindle the animals' hunting instincts.

Once they are deemed capable of fending for themselves they will also be able to walk out of the camp. As the area is part of the Arabian Wildlife Park, all that is necessary to release them is to open the gates. This, said Mr Nielsen, minimises stress to the animals. The four cheetahs have been given to TDIC on loan by the Sheikh Butti bin Juma Al Maktoum Wildlife Centre in Dubai and the Sharjah Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife. The arrangement comes within two international conservation programmes – the European Endangered Species Programme and the European Association of Zoos & Aquaria programme for northern cheetahs.

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