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Abstract: Populations of lions and cheetahs established by re-introduction in the Phinda Resource Reserve in northern Natal, South Africa, are providing individuals for other re-introduction efforts in the region. This is an encouraging sign that such projects have potential in the gradual restoration of species across their former range.

Secondary Reintroductions of Large Cats in South Africa

by Luke Hunter*

Populations of lions and cheetahs established by re-introduction in the Phinda Resource Reserve in northern Natal, South Africa (see *Cat News* 24) are providing individuals for other re-introduction efforts in the region. At the end of 1995, a pair of sibling male cheetahs was translocated from Phinda about 850 km north-west to Madikwe Game Reserve near South Africa's border with Botswana. The two cheetahs were born at Phinda to a female released there in 1992 and it was decided to shift them to avoid the possibility of them breeding with related females. The two brothers have settled in to Madikwe without incident and are being radio-tracked to follow their progress. Two unrelated males, wild-caught in Namibia have since been released at Phinda to introduce new genetic stock into that population.

In April and May of this year, eight lions from Phinda were translocated to Tswalu Desert Reserve, a privately owned tract of 70,000 hectares on the southern fringe of the Kalahari Desert. Like Phinda, Tswalu was formed with the purchase and consolidation of many small properties previously engaged mostly in cattle-farming and hunting. The new development, which will concentrate primarily on tourism, has re-stocked the area with over 1,000 head of wildlife, including black rhinos from Etosha National Park in Namibia. Tswalu's new lions were born to individuals translocated to Phinda from the eastern Transvaal four years ago. It is hoped these second generation re-introductions will found a new population in an area where, like Phinda, lions existed decades ago before they were extirpated by human activities.

These secondary re-introductions illustrate the kind of active management necessary for re-introduced populations if they are to succeed. The Madikwe and Tswalu translocations were undertaken to avoid the deleterious effects of in-breeding in the Phinda cats, a serious long-term threat to small populations with low numbers of founding members. Additionally, it alleviates competition for space arising in rapidly growing populations in small reserves. At Phinda (180 km²), this pressure has recently been manifested in increasing incidences of cats leaving the reserve and conflicting with local land-owners. Four of the lions moved to Tswalu were responsible for killing R18,000 worth of cattle and game on a property neighbouring the reserve. Fortunately, good relations between the land-owner and Phinda enabled the lions to be retrieved and translocated.

Perhaps more importantly, the distribution of cats from Phinda represents an exciting trend in South Africa in which eco-tourism is providing a demand for re-establishment of large carnivores in areas of their former range. That the cheetahs and lions established by re-introduction at Phinda are assisting the re-stocking of other areas is an encouraging sign that such projects have exciting potential in the gradual restoration of species across their former range.

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