

Project Update April 2011:

The Ukusutha move one step closer to life back in the wild.

Friday, April 29th was an unforgettable day. It was the day we moved the “pups” to the Victoria Falls Private Game Reserve (VFPGR) and so one step closer to life back in the wild.

Ukusutha, which translates roughly as “very full,” as in having eaten too much food, is the name we gave to the pups that were brought into the PDC Rehabilitation Facility in July 2009. The five pups were at their den but it was apparent that lions had killed their parents. With only an old male dog and yearling dogs evident, it was felt that the chances of the pups surviving were remote. With fire also threatening the den, the difficult decision was made to capture the pups and raise them at PDC.



The pack has been supplemented with the addition of Sithule, now a three-year-old male, who had walked into the PDC Rehabilitation Facility with his brother, Sibuyile in May 2009, both of them at death's door. They were integrated into the ill-fated Bambanani pack, which was released into Hwange National Park in August 2009. Sithule survived the snares and road traffic that obliterated the Bambanani and we brought him back into the Rehab in October 2009.

The move to VFPGR started early. Moving the dogs during the cool of the morning was the priority, not our sleep. Once the light in the eastern sky gave us enough illumination we moved quickly, but quietly, into position. Everyone knew his or her roles. We had done this before and were well-prepared. Our custom-built dog trailer was in place, with a funnel, created by boma sheeting already erected. The plan was to move the dogs slowly and quietly into the trailer. The “driving” team walked into the enclosure that housed the dogs while Washington Moyo waited to operate the slide gates. Rehab Supervisor, Xmas Mpofo, waited on top of the trailer, for instruction to drop the gate and lock the dogs inside.

At first the dogs, ever curious, approached the driving team rather than walking away! They soon realized that something was afoot however, and moved to the slide gate that connects the two enclosures. On my signal, Washington opened the gate and the dogs rushed through. We followed quickly and Washington closed the gate behind us. Now we were all in the enclosure with the trailer and boma-sheeting funnel. Standing shoulder to shoulder the driving team moved slowly and quietly forward, pressing the dogs towards the trailer. It was essential not to panic the dogs as they would simply race past us or even between our legs and chaos would ensue.

Sithule jumped in to the trailer, then jumped out! Nyeza, Dutchie and Gaia jumped in, then jumped out! The tension was tangible. Slowly we pressed forward until a stand off developed. The dogs just lay on the floor at the entrance to the trailer and we stood, crouched just meters away. Dogs moved in and out, but I wanted all six in at once before I could give Xmas the signal to close the trailer. In and out they went. Two dogs in, four out; three in, three out; four in, two out. I almost gave the signal to close, accepting the four and knowing I would have to dart the remaining two. I told myself to be patient. We edged half a step forward and the last two jumped in. On my signal Xmas dropped the gate and we had them safely

inside. Big smiles all round as we secured the gate and hooked it up to my Land Rover ready for the two-hour drive to VFPGR.

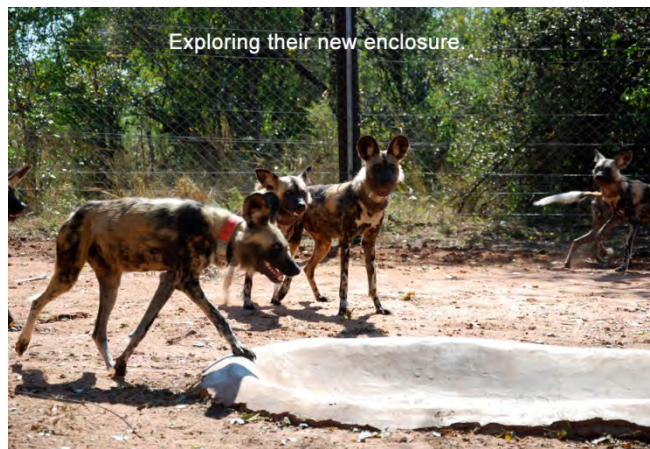


It could not have gone more smoothly. The welfare of the dogs was and is always of paramount importance. They were inside the trailer, wide-awake, probably anxious, but certainly not stressed. It was still only 06:30 so we would have them in their new home long before the heat of the day was upon us.



The drive to VFPGR was uneventful. We arrived in good time and backed the trailer up to the gate of their new home. Xmas had spent a week at the VFPGR preparing the boma that would now hold the dogs for up to two months. Research and experience have taught us that the dogs need to be held in a safe enclosure in the place we ultimately want them to stay. If we simply opened the trailer and let them go they would make every effort to return to Hwange as soon as possible. Unless they got killed on the way they would probably make the 200km journey in three or four days. So they are now being held until the end of June, when we will then open the gate of their new enclosure. They have already had a fence line encounter with

are to make it in the wild proper. When we release them in June we will closely monitor their progress but feel confident that they will make a quick transition into the wild, with Sithule leading the way.



We would like to acknowledge and thank Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority for their unstinting support and cooperation during this entire exercise, which extends back to the original capture in July 2009. The Owners, Management and staff of Victoria Falls Private Game Reserve for their equally vital support and of course you, for the tremendous support you afford PDC. Thank You.

