



The N/a'an ku sê Wild Leopard Release

Last year, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism confiscated two leopards, who were kept in horrendous conditions, from Farm Werda near Tsumeb. The male had been kept in a small cage near a cattle kraal for three years and the female in a box trap for a year. The MET contacted the N/a'an ku sê to keep the leopards in safe custody while the court case took place. In October last year, a female leopard and her cub were caught by a farmer on a farm near Mt Etjo. The farmer insisted they were problem animals, ie they were killing his cattle. The farmer called N/a'an ku sê to come and remove them.

On the 3rd February, volunteers Jill, Andrea, Kirsten and Lucia set out with our research experts, Flo and Cila, for a truly unforgettable experience. They were travelling to the Namib Naukluft National Park to release their three feline passengers; a female leopard, her cub and an adult male leopard, back into the wild. Here, Lucia and Jill share some of their memories.

We rose at the crack of dawn, filled with anticipation about the mammoth journey and admittedly, rather daunting task ahead of us. The cats were all ready for transportation, having been fitted previously with their radio collars. As we fastened our kit to the trailer around their cages we became very aware of their moods. Despite the blankets which covered their cages (to relieve their stress as much as possible), their low, yet extremely audible, growls let us know they were not in the best of spirits.



Arriving at the first release site in the early evening, we set up to release the mother and cub. As leopards have been known to turn on humans around them, it was only when we were all safely in the vehicle that Flo opened the capture cage to set them free. However, much to our surprise, neither mum nor cub emerged. We surmised that after their long journey they were nervous to explore their new surroundings and lowered the cage from the trailer to the ground. Despite waiting for two and a half hours, they still didn't emerge and we decided to leave them to venture out overnight at their own pace.

We headed to our farmhouse and discovered our only means of entry was climbing through the window as we didn't find the key that we expected in the door. An elegant entrance! Covered in dirt and dust from our long journey we were ready for a shower... but alas the water tank was empty! We tucked into our dinner of spaghetti and watched the glorious sun set. Luxuries out here are definitely few and far between but the scenery is magical and the views are stunning.



It was an early start the next day and our first stop was the release site, where we checked the cage with baited breath and were delighted to discover that mum and cub had summoned up the courage to set off into the mountains. As we drove to the second release site and then prepared to set free the male leopard, we little anticipated that he, too, would be less than eager to escape. Cila and Flo ripped the covers from the cage, allowing our male to view the area around him and hopefully be less keen to remain within the security of his cage. It worked! Within minutes, as we watched, filled with adrenalin and awe, he strolled from the cage. He turned to gaze at us momentarily on his way and then meandered down towards the riverbed, as content and at home as if he hadn't just spent the last three years in captivity. It was an amazing moment watching this magnificent animal return to his deserved freedom. The beautiful landscape and abundant game only reinforced to us what a perfect leopard home this was going to make.



Our work certainly wasn't over yet! Almost as soon as tracking began we received a signal from the male leopard. We moved back to our first release site to try and secure a location on the mother and her cub. At the road the responses were too weak so we headed up one of the nearest mountains to try and pick up a better signal. We clambered to the top but didn't have the chance to catch our breath before Cila and Flo announced that the receiver was picking up a response without the antenna. This meant that our female leopard and her cub were less than 50m from us. When Cila commanded us, "Get down the mountain now!" we didn't have to be told twice!

As the temperature was soaring over 40 degrees, we escaped the heat of the day in our deluxe swimming pool; the huge water dam which contributes to the animal water holes. Submerging ourselves in the water was absolute bliss and the best wash we had all week! After another session of tracking later in the evening, we returned again to the house and tucked into a fabulous, celebratory braai.

We feel incredibly privileged to have had such an amazing opportunity and to see these leopards free and released back to the wild where they belong. We truly recommend our experience at N/a'an ku sê and would like to thank Flo and Cila for all their work.



Lucia, Jill and the rest of the volunteers and research team on their adventure.

Get involved

To experience your own life changing African adventure, wild carnivore release and volunteer at the project visit www.volunteersnamibia.com or email bookingsnaankuse@iway.na .

We were able to collar both the male and female leopards with VHF collars. These will enable us to track their movements, check on their condition in their new environment and work to identify a sustainable and successful solution for re-locating problem animals so they are no longer shot and killed. If you would like to make a donation or help raise funds for the collars we still desperately need to release more animals back to the wild please email Dara at naankuse@iway.na .