



TORTOISES: A SLOW WALK TO FREEDOM

FreeMe Wildlife Rehabilitation NPC (FreeMe) is a rescue centre that offers a safe haven for many species of South Africa's wildlife that are injured or displaced due to habitat loss, orphaning, human-animal conflict, and other factors that influence their survival. Many organisations experience difficulties in transformation, and FreeMe is no different. The new board of 2015, with its directive to create an accountable, transparent and compliant non-profit company, discovered irregularities within the organisation in terms of their rehabilitation, release protocols and general management operational procedures. This in itself has its own complications in achieving goals.

One of FreeMe's lengthy and more controversial concerns has been the rehabilitation and release of the tortoises that have been housed at FreeMe since 2014. The release of the tortoises poses not only a problem for the organisation but also for other stakeholders such as the NSPCA and GDARD. Karien Schmidt, the new animal curator at FreeMe, confirmed that when she started work at FreeMe, in October 2015, a large number of the tortoises were infected with an upper respiratory disease. It is not unusual for tortoises in captivity to be sick as they are highly susceptible to Mycoplasmas (disease causing agents) and the Chelonian Herpes virus. Symptoms for both of these diseases are similar and expensive tests need to be conducted to determine the particular disease. Treatment usually helps in alleviating symptoms but not necessarily in eradicating the disease. Thus the disease may reoccur many months after the last symptoms, even if proper treatment has been administered. In this instance, the underlying cause for the spread of the disease was as a result of inadequate space as well as a general lack of knowledge and/or experience in the housing and rehabilitation of such a large number of tortoises. Sadly, the majority of the tortoises appeared to be infected and required the intervention of veterinarians. Once the infection, and root causes, had been clearly identified by the veterinary team while working in collaboration with NSPCA and GDARD, the habitat conditions for the tortoises was immediately improved, males separated from females, and infected tortoises were quarantine with regular veterinarian examinations in addition to daily and weekly monitoring. Further an evaluation system to continually assess the condition of all the tortoises at FreeMe has been implemented.

Tortoises take several months to completely recover from these infections. The tortoises that are too severely compromised may have to be euthanized as their immune systems are too weak or they are unable to withstand the series of treatments necessary to facilitate a full recovery. The ideal time for tortoises to be released is in spring after the first rains have fallen and the grass is sprouting. However there are restrictions for tortoise releases in Gauteng that must be adhered to and tortoises may only be released once GDARD has given written permission and issued the necessary permits. FreeMe has been in discussions with the relevant authorities since September 2015 and is anticipating receipt of the release approvals in the very near future. If approved FreeMe would introduce the rescued tortoises to a suitable habitat in a fenced-off area with little to no contact with wild tortoises to prevent transmission of diseases and possible genetic contamination. Baby tortoises will continue to be reared at FreeMe until they are big enough to be released, as they can easily fall prey to predators if they are released too small.

FreeMe continues to work closely with the NSPCA and GDARD on a proposed releasing strategy and is in the process of finalizing its permits to allow the new professional FreeMe to open its doors to new wildlife admissions in the not too distant future.

FREEME WILDLIFE REHABILITATION NPC

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On a lighter note, FreeMe has recently successfully released 2 beautiful groups of meerkats at a game lodge in the Bronkhorstspuit region near to the border between Gauteng and Mpumalanga. The release pre-requisites for meerkats include identifying their natural distribution ranges, population density, long and short-term climatic conditions and forecasts (e.g. droughts), insect load, time of release and social hierarchy. The game lodge falls within the meerkats natural distribution area and the meerkats appear to be settling in well. Many meerkats in FreeMe's care for rehabilitation were either confiscated by the relevant authorities or were raised as pets and then handed over to FreeMe after becoming too wild. These animals are usually imprinted and the rehabilitation process of such animals can be very lengthy. Interestingly, if meerkats have the opportunity to breed in captivity (during their rehabilitation process) the pups act like glue resulting in a more tightly bonded group compared to rehabilitated groups that did not breed in captivity. This bonding gives the group a better chance of survival after release due to their protective nature of family members. When FreeMe released the meerkats this interesting behaviour was observed. It appears that the group with offspring has settled in and overcame some of the challenges of a new free life much quicker compared to the second group with no offspring. FreeMe continues to conduct post-release monitoring and support feeding insofar as to ensure that the meerkats are settling into their new habitat and life.

Should you be interested in the continued existence of FreeMe Wildlife Rehabilitation NPC and the services it provides to the greater community of Johannesburg, wildlife and conservation, please contact us on:

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