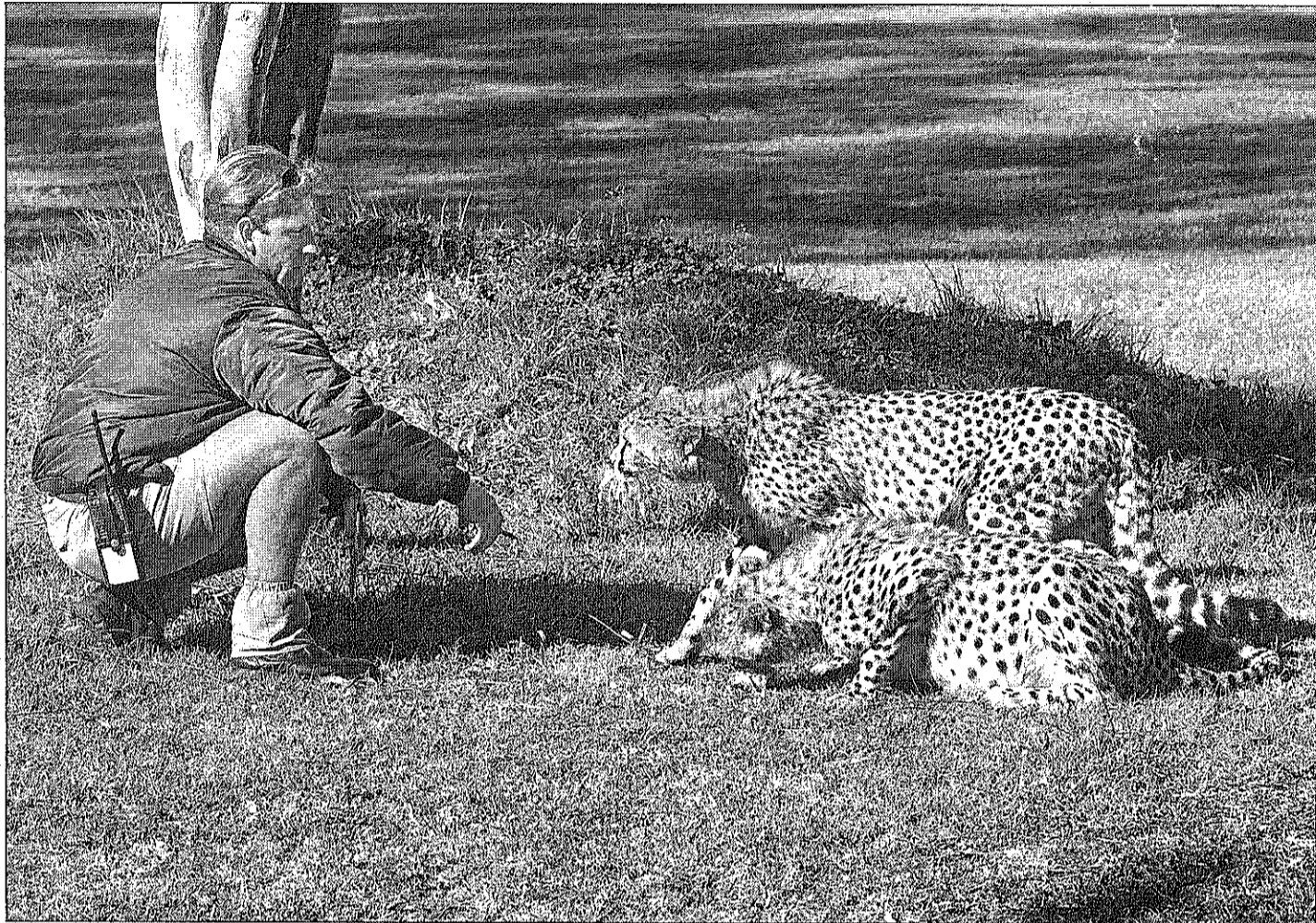


WEEKEND MAGAZINE



▲ **BID TO SAVE SPECIES:** John Lemon at work at Western Plains Zoo with the animals he loves so much.

A Dubbo wildlife specialist is so concerned the African cape hunting dog will go the way of the Tasmanian tiger that he has decided to move to Africa in a bold attempt to save them from extinction.

A committed wildlife researcher, John Lemon has given up a cherished 12-year career working with the cape hunting dogs and cheetah at Western Plains Zoo to move to Zimbabwe with the hope of building a wildlife rehabilitation and education centre.

"Everyone reckons I'm mad but there are only a couple of thousand of them left (African hunting dogs), someone has to do something," the passionate and determined nature lover remarked.

Originally more than 100,000 of the wild dogs roamed the African continent but a combination of factors has reduced their number to a few small pockets in South Africa, Tanzania, Botswana and Zimbabwe.

"Once they are gone that will be it," John said.

"They are a mono genus species, they can't be regenerated and at the rate they are being destroyed they could be completely wiped out in the next 20 years."

According to John the largest remnant of the endangered species (about 750) is in Zimbabwe.

"The region's unstable political climate is having a devastating effect on all the wildlife in that country," he said.

"Inflation is running at such a high rate in Zimbabwe that people are forced to do whatever they can to survive.

"This has created a situation where no animal in that country is safe.

"If they are not shot by farmers or caught in poachers' snares they are killed as trophies by

MERCY MISSION

Wildlife researcher John Lemon is heading to Zimbabwe in a bid to save the African cape hunting dog from extinction. So strong is his dedication John is leaving behind his wife Angela and his 12-year career working with the dogs at Western Plains Zoo. **STEVE HODDER** spoke to John about what he hopes to achieve.

wealthy overseas game hunters."

Despite Zimbabwe's current political climate, which has made the country an unsafe place for white people, John Lemon feels compelled to help the nation's animal population.

"They are gentle, loving people in the areas I am, I don't hold any fears for my safety with them," he said.

"I'm not going there to cause trouble, I'm going to help but I'll make sure I keep my head down.

"But Australia voting to kick them out of the Commonwealth hasn't helped."

While determined to go John said he was not being foolhardy and was well aware of the ever-present danger.

"Just last month I heard an Australian woman was shot, so I know the risks," he said.

"But I believe I can provide the indigenous people with alternatives to killing their wild ani-

mals to survive.

"I want to educate them and tell the world how close many of the African species are to being wiped out."

While the poor of Zimbabwe are responsible for much of the killing John realises the mitigating circumstances behind it.

"Inflation over there is skyrocketing," John explained.

"People can't afford to live so they are being forced back to living off the land.

"It's amazing to see the turnaround in the economy since Mugabe took over.

"Their currency used to be stronger than the British pound, now it takes 330 Zimbabwean dollars to equal one US dollar."

John has been busy of late organising funding and materials for his rehabilitation centre, which he hopes to start work on in the coming months.

"I received a bit of sponsorship and donations but a lot of the

money is coming out of my own pocket," he explained.

"I've cashed in my long service and superannuation to do this but I believe it is worth it.

"I don't think people realise the severity of the destruction taking place in Zimbabwe and that's fair enough because you couldn't unless you have been there and seen it first hand."

John has made two trips to Africa in the past two years.

It was the things he saw on his second trip last year that spurred him into action.

While many of the country's animals are threatened it is the painted hunting dogs (a close relative of the cape hunting dogs) that are of particular interest to him.

"I'm currently doing a thesis on these animals for my masters degree," he explained.

"They are not a huge dog and are quite vulnerable to attack from larger predators such as

lions and hyenas."

John said people sometimes confused the hunting dogs with hyenas but they were a completely different species.

"Hyenas are a much larger animal, about 80kgs, while the biggest hunting dog would only grow to about 28kgs.

"Hunting dogs have little chance against a pack of hyenas, which often kill the adults and eat their young."

John said he received a fright while camping out the last time he was in Africa when a pack of hyenas came through their camp sniffing around their swags.

"It was a bit scary but it was also an unforgettable experience being out there among all those wild animals," he said.

John was out there working with the local people and being shown the devastating effects of the poachers' snares and traps.

The saddest part for John was that many of the animals were not killed but left injured, maimed and left to die a pitiful death.

He intends to stay in Africa until the beginning of the wet season, which starts about December.

"Once the wet sets in there's not much you can do, so I'll either come back here and look for work or go to America to try and drum up funds to keep the work going in Africa," he said.

His wife Angela, who has a degree with honours in zoology, is equally committed to saving these animals but will be staying in Dubbo to maintain their home.

"Angela supports me 100 per cent, she knows why I have to go," he said.

"I know this will be hard on both of us but these animals are running out of time.

"If something isn't done now the African wild dogs will go the way of the thylacine (Tasmanian tiger)."