



▲ **ON A MISSION:** Dubbo's John Lemon (top) treating a snared dog in Zimbabwe; John and local villagers (above) with a dead dog found in a snare; and (right) a rare sight in Zimbabwe - cape hunting dog pups.



Survival mission

He's given up his job of 12 years to brave the troubled country of Zimbabwe on a quest to save its threatened cape hunting dogs. **STEVE HODDER** reports on John Lemon's mission.

After four months in Zimbabwe working to save the cape hunting dog from extinction Dubbo wildlife conservationist John Lemon called into home for a brief visit this week before returning to the strife-torn country.

Concerned for the future safety of Zimbabwe's estimated 750 remaining cape hunting dogs, John left his cherished keeper's job at Western Plains Zoo in June to embark on a crusade to save the species.

"Everyone thought I was mad to give up a good job I've had for 12 years to go to a third-world country to work for nothing," John said.

But John doesn't see it as working for nothing, he has a clear vision of what will happen to the cape hunting dogs if someone doesn't do something straight away to stop their slaughter.

"They have become the innocent victim of the country's political climate, which is causing widespread poverty and starvation," John explained.

"Many of the country's people are starving and for that reason they are setting snares to capture the wildlife to eat.

"Unfortunately the snares don't discriminate and they are catching anything that comes

into their path."

John's aim is to build a community education and conservation centre to save the animals and educate the locals about the need for conservation.

He has had some financial assistance from Bradley Trevor Grieve, author of the best-selling *Blue Day Book*.

John will be joining the author for the national launch of his latest book *Priceless* and using the opportunity to raise awareness of the plight of the cape hunting dogs to audiences across Australia.

"Bradley has been very supportive of our cause," John said. "He has made a considerable contribution toward the establishment of the conservation centre, which is already making a difference among the locals."

John and several other volunteers have formed an anti-poaching group, arresting commercial poachers and handing them over to the village chiefs for punishment.

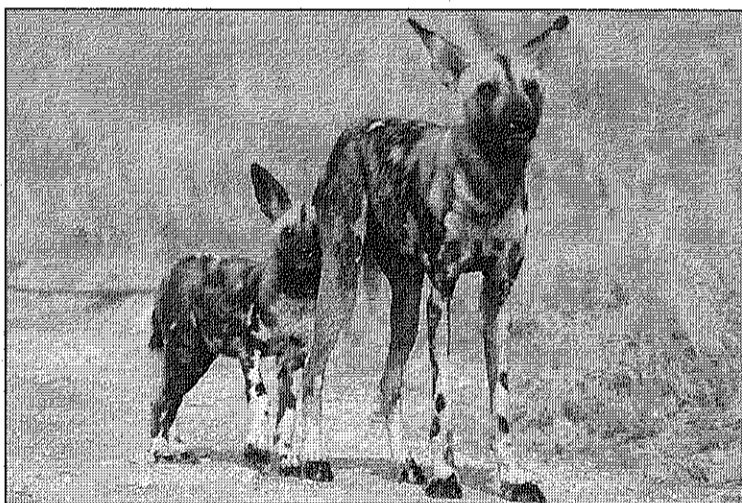
"The snares have had a devastating effect," John said. "In some areas as much as 80 per cent of the wildlife has been decimated."

"And it's not just the cape hunting dogs; we have seen elephants, lions, baboons and numerous species of antelope fall victim to the snares."

John doesn't blame the local villagers for the problem as they are also victims of a system gone wrong.

"The people of Zimbabwe are battling rampant inflation that has spiralled out of control," he said.

"Their dollar has gone from being worth more than the



▲ **UNDER THREAT:** A lone mother and her pup - they have been named Nescio and Dubbo respectively.

English pound to less than 1000th of its value.

"Local Zimbabweans can't afford to buy food. So they have no choice, they have to feed their families and trapping is the only way they know how."

But with the help of people like Bradley Trevor Grieve, John has been able to begin work on a rehabilitation centre to save injured animals, in particular the cape hunting dogs.

"The locals have been very supportive of this project and are beginning to embrace it," John said.

"The children especially enjoy the education programs we have devised and incorporated into games.

"They also like helping rehabilitate the injured and orphaned animals and in doing so gain a greater understanding of the indiscriminate and cruel effect the snares are having on innocent lives."

Years of study and practical

experience working at Western Plains Zoo have given John valuable knowledge that he is now applying to designing and building the rehabilitation centre at Dete.

"The centre has been designed and will be built to suit the specific needs of the environment in which it is located," John said.

"It will be the only one of its kind in the world and hopefully we will be able to rebuild the populations of many of the area's threatened species."

Having spent the past seven weeks with her husband in Zimbabwe, qualified zoologist Angela Lemon has returned to Dubbo this week to continue fundraising to support John's efforts.

"It's shocking what is going on over there, it is very sad," Angela said.

"They are beautiful people but their country is being torn apart politically and they are

being decimated by AIDS.

"Every third person in Zimbabwe is supposedly infected with HIV and when you see the number of deaths over there it's not hard to believe."

Angela fears for John's safety in Zimbabwe but has never asked him not to go.

"I don't like John being over there alone but I understand his need to save the animals."

"He's applying for permanent residency and I suppose most people would think he is crazy wanting to live in a country where most of the white people are leaving."

From his observations John estimates about only 20 per cent of Zimbabwe's white farmers remain in the country. The rest, he says, have fled in fear for their lives.

"It's a dangerous place but it's also a very beautiful place," John said.

John has approached the ABC and is hoping it will produce a documentary on the area where he is working.

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed the ABC will pick up this story and give it international exposure," he said.

"The rehabilitation centre at Dete will be the only one of its kind in the world and if it is to be truly effective it will need international support."

John is only staying in Australia long enough to complete his masters degree and drum up a bit of sponsorship before heading back to Dete.

"There used to be half a million cape hunting dogs in Africa, now there's less than 2000. If something isn't done to halt their decline they'll be all gone within 20 years."