

# The Weekly

## FREE STATE BREEDS EXTINCT CHINA TIGER

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Surviving and thriving ... Eleven South China Tigers have been born at Laohu Valley Reserve since the first two zoo-bred tigers were brought from China in 2003.

The future of the critically endangered South China Tiger is looking a bit brighter with the ambitious, although at times considered controversial, re-wilding project near Philippolis in the Southern Free State showing gains.

Dusk falls over the African Savannah. In the distance the foreign yelps of one of the world's most critically endangered species are heard, followed by a stern growl. A striped head appears above the tall grass, whiskers twitch as a sniff detects the scent of an intruder drifting in the evening air in the valley. With a quick glance at the cubs hiding near the river bed behind her, a majestic tigress steps forward to investigate. She is Madonna, a South China Tiger born in captivity but successfully rewilded in Africa. She is also the proud mother of five, including her latest, triplet girls.

In this unlikely corner of the world, 12 000 kilometres from its native land, the South China Tiger has found a second chance to survive, thrive, and eventually return to its home to roam free once again. 'Re-wilding' refers to a soft release process by which captive-born animals gradually learn to survive on their own in a large natural enclosure and then they are eventually returned to a more natural environment.

Thought to be extinct in the wild, there are only about 100 of these tigers left on the planet – most of them are in zoos. This is because government-sponsored wildlife elimination teams removed wildlife, including tigers, from China between 1952 and the mid-1970s.

# The Weekly

Nearly a decade ago, the first two tigers arrived at the Laohu Valley Reserve, which boasts 33 000 hectares of land nestled between the Free State and Northern Cape. 'Laohu' is an endearing term for tiger in Chinese.

Now, there are 14 tigers at this reserve near Philippolis, 11 of which were born on Free State soil. Plans are on track to return the first rewilded tigers to China next year and research done over the past few years is due to be published soon. Renowned scientists also believe that the methods developed at the facility signal the future of big cat conservation.

The reserve has drawn headlines when it was announced in 2003 that tigers from China would be arriving in South Africa later that year in a desperate last-ditch attempt to save the species from extinction.

South Africa has enough open space and the needed expertise to attempt such an ambitious project – both things China lacked.

With more than half of China's 1.3 billion people living in rural areas and time running out for the tiger, Chinese businesswoman Li Quan left a successful career in fashion behind and took it upon herself to do something about the plight of these animals.

Along with her investment banker husband Stuart Bray, she founded Save China's Tigers – a charity organisation with offices in China, the UK, the USA, Australia, and South Africa. It operates through a network of volunteers, experts, financiers, and supporters who all are deeply concerned about the future of the South China Tiger.



*Conservation passion personified ... Save China's Tiger founder Li Quan 'chuffs' at one of her precious tigers.*

On a trip to Africa, Quan was inspired by how ecotourism is used as a sustainable conservation model. She hopes this can be applied to China.

# The Weekly

“When I saw how a leopard, a lion, and a cheetah had created the whole tourist industry around here in South Africa, I started dreaming how a tiger could do the same in China.” In the early 2000s, Quan convinced the Chinese government to use South African expertise to assist the Chinese Tiger Reintroduction Project.



*A young male South China Tiger, Jen B, pursues a Blesbuck in the hunting camp.*

Its goal is to “re-establish a genetically viable population of free-ranging South China tigers in restored native habitat through a programme of captive breeding, rewilding, restoring the ecosystem and prey base, and releasing tigers in China”.

It took several years to prepare 17 former sheep farms to become the visiting tigers’ new home. Livestock and hundreds of kilometres of fences had to be removed and solar powered predator-proof fencing had to be installed.

Today, the natural shrubbery of the land is restored and herds of antelope roam freely in the reserve. The big cats in the reserve have all been micro-chipped, as required by law, and most fitted with radio collars to track their every move.

Just last week the three new cubs were caught by hand and micro-chipped. This is a painstaking process, as the use of anaesthetics is limited because it has an adverse effect on them.

However, it has not been all smooth sailing for the project.

Just after Quan signed the agreement with China to reintroduce tigers to the wild, the project suffered a major blow. Quan and Bray accused their partners, wildlife filmmaker and ecotourism developers John and Dave Varty, of misappropriating funds earmarked for the establishment of the reserve. The court battle has been dragging on for nine years.

The break left Quan without a team and the project seemed dead in the water. She was, however, determined to see it through, and built up a new team of expertise from scratch ready for the first tigers’ arrival in late 2003.



# The Weekly

Cathay and Hope were the first zoo-born cubs to arrive. After adapting very well to the wild, disaster struck when the male, Hope, died of a lung infection. This left the project with only three tigers after another breeding pair, Madonna and TigerWoods, arrived a year after the first two.

Quan was still determined to succeed and over the next few years the tigers at Laohu learned to hunt amid protests from animal rights groups who deemed the process cruel to the prey.

More court battles ensued, but ultimately the case brought by the NSPCA was dismissed.

In 2007, another tiger, 327, was relocated from a Chinese zoo to join the breeding programme. That same year history was made when the first South China Tiger was born outside of its native country. He was named Huloo.

Last year, the stork was gracious to Laohu and brought six new arrivals, all sired by 327, to the valley. Sadly, the proud father was killed after he broke through a barrier to challenge his love rival Tiger Woods. He proved no match for the tiger that had undergone rewilding training for much longer.

“In a perverse way this accident shows that the rewilding project has proven to be a success,” said Quan.

Scientists involved with the project explain in a thesis, *Rewilding the South China Tiger*, that when the first two cubs arrived they did not recognise a chicken carcass as food and they had to be fed chopped meat.

“Later, when they were presented with a live chicken, they approached it with curiosity. The cubs also had to become familiar with a natural environment. The first time their paws touched grass, they shook them as if they had stepped onto a foreign substance.”

The rewilding protocol, designed by Gus van Dyk, an expert in the field, and fine-tuned by the Save China's Tigers team throughout the eight years, requires moving tigers among 40 and 100 hectare enclosures for breeding and rewilding.

“Blesbuck was chosen as prey because it is easily managed within fences, readily available from local game farms, and is comparable in size to some native prey in China.”

Ten or more blesbuck are released into electrified enclosures and allowed time to become accustomed to the terrain before one to three tigers are released into the enclosure. Hunting success and failure are monitored daily. According to the rewilding protocol, if a tiger fails to hunt successfully within six days, it will be given food so as to maintain its condition.

“A tiger's hunting success is invariably poor immediately following its initial release in a stocked enclosure. Though tigers are able to secure various small prey items such as guinea fowl, they required several months to a year to become effective hunters,” states the paper.

The research showed that captive-born tigers generally do not initially recognise potential prey, and that hunting is a learned behaviour. “Though the ability to hunt is innate, the skill necessary to hunt successfully takes many months to learn. To release captive-born inexperienced sub-adult or adult tigers to a wild area, even one with abundant prey, would be both cavalier and irresponsible.”

A full-grown tiger consumes a blesbuck every four days, a meal Quan says costs about \$200.

# The Weekly

Although the reserve has an abundance of antelope, Quan explained that catching the buck and releasing them into the enclosures involved helicopters and was stressful to the animals. They now buy the live prey from farmers in the area.

Because it is currently not hunting season, the tigers have to be satisfied with carcasses. They bound excitedly to the edge of their enclosures as the feeding truck approaches and pay little attention to other vehicles in the area, a trend Quan said they are also studying.

Although the reserve is owned by the Chinese Tigers South Africa Trust for the benefit of the National Wildlife Research and Development Centre of the State Forestry Administration of China, Quan has not written it off as a tourist destination yet.

“Given that we have to devote a lot of resources to both rehabilitate the habitat from farmland to wildlife land, game reintroductions, and particularly the difficult and time-consuming job of rewilding the tigers, we have not got around to ecotourism.”

According to Quan, the tigers need to be rewilded and bred with as little as possible human contact. In addition, legal battles have consumed much of the funds which could have been invested in the tourist infrastructure.

“However, we are still one of the biggest, if not the largest, employers in Philippiolis, providing jobs for about 20 locals. Furthermore, we are still hoping to reintroduce the Free State symbol of cheetahs, although it continues getting delayed due to various unforeseen obstacles such as floods, snowstorms, and fires.”

Quan added that it costs about \$500 000 (about R4-million) a year to run the project. The next step will be to send the first viable candidates to a transition site in China. In all likelihood these will be Jen B and Coco, two males born in a completely natural environment and who have experienced very little human interference.

Experts from the organisation have already made several trips to China to scout appropriate reintroduction sites and hopes are they will soon be ready for the tigers to return and claim their rightful place as the cultural symbol of China.

In the meantime, third generation cubs might be born in the near future as second generation tigers have started mating.

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