

News Report

Major Boost For Quagga Project

South Africa's world famous quagga breeding programme has received a tremendous boost with the signing of a co-operative agreement between SA National Parks (SANP) and the Quagga Project Association.

Initiated by the SA Museum in 1987, the Quagga Project has gained enormous international status as efforts to reproduce the once extinct creature, *Equus quagga quagga*, have yielded promising results.

"The last quagga in the world died in the Amsterdam Zoo on 12 August 1883. The chances are increasingly strong that the world's first pure re-bred quagga could be born in the Western Cape within the next few years," says Reinhold Rau, co-ordinator of the Quagga Project.

The beautiful plains zebra, once abundant in the Karoo and Free State, was ruthlessly hunted to extinction during the 19th century. The Project attempts to breed a population of these half-striped zebra through continuous selection of animals, which in their external appearance, and possibly genetically, will be closer if not identical to the extinct quagga.

"It is evident from the 23 preserved quagga skins that this former population displayed great variations both in their general colour and in the extent of the striped areas of the body. Present southern plains zebra show similar individual variation," says Rau.

"DNA analysis of the quagga in the early 1980s has shown that it was one of several subspecies of the plains or Burchell's zebra, and not a separate species. It is likely that some of the quagga genes are still present in extant southern plains zebra populations, though diluted and dispersed.

"By bringing selected individuals together and so concentrating the quagga genes, a population should emerge that will be closer to the original quagga than any other extant plains zebra," he says.

The question has been raised whether re-bred animals will be genuine quaggas or simply look-alikes. However, since the coat-pattern characteristics are the only criteria by which the quagga is identified, Rau says that re-bred animals that demonstrate these characteristics could justifiably be called quaggas.

In terms of the latest agreement, SANP will make available certain selected plains zebras with quagga like characteristics in some of the national parks to the project for inclusion into the breeding groups outside the national parks.

"Besides contributing knowledge, expertise and habitat for animals in the breeding programme, SANP undertakes to bear the cost of capture and transport of these animals in any translocations," says Mavuso Msimang, CEO of SANP.

A number of project zebras have already been translocated to the Karoo National Park at Beaufort West and the Addo Elephant National Park near Port Elizabeth. There the selective breeding will continue in collaboration with SANP.

According to Prof Mike Cluver, Chairman of the Quagga Project Association and Director of the SA Museum, the quagga re-breeding programme is comparable to the breeding of the Mongolian wild horse, the Przewalski horse, or the breeding of the European wild horse, the tarpan, which is under way in Poland.

"The Quagga Project could be considered as genetic conservation in a wider sense, as it aims at retrieving the former quagga's genes," he says.

"Of the present population of 70 project zebras, two second generation animals displaying the closest stripe pattern and colouration of the quagga will be mated. Their offspring could well turn out to be real McCoy," says Rau.

The four month old filly is being raised near Wellington, and the 20 month old colt is located at the Groote Schuur Estate in the Cape Peninsula National Park.

According to Dr Anthony Hall-Martin of SANP, the project holds significant scientific benefits in terms of the protection of the South Africa's biodiversity and the preservation of rare and endangered animal species.

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