



2008



**AQUILA ANIMAL RESCUE
AND CONSERVATION CENTRE**



PRESS RELEASE

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Island animals starve



NO URBAN LEGEND: Starving rabbits on Robben Island have taken to climbing as high as four metres up thorn trees in their search for edible vegetation



BLEAK TIMES: One of the few remaining springbok on Robben Island. The veld has been devastated by over-grazing by the exploding rabbit population and, until recently, an over-abundance of fallow deer

Robben museum managers accused of 'ignoring warnings' of threat

By **JOHN YELD**
Environment & Science Writer

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Robben Island's natural environment is in crisis, with animals including bontebok, springbok, fallow deer and rabbits, starving to death because of a lack of vegetation, says this World Heritage Site.

Environmentalists are blaming the disaster because it allegedly ignored warnings given three years ago about the ecological threat posed by the rabbits.

They warned that the island's World Heritage Site status, which had previously been threatened because of the poor environmental management, could again come under review.

Although some mammals have been removed during the past year,

there is not enough nutrition on the island for those left behind.

And a rabbit culling programme was stopped – apparently because the contractor had not been paid.

Estelle van der Merwe, who worked closely with the Robben Island authorities during the Treasury oil spill in 2006, said she was appalled by the situation.

"I have been going there since 1984 and I have never seen the island, and specifically the animals and the environment, in as bad a state as it is now."

"There is very little ground cover left and parts of the island are extremely sandy. The buck are literally starving and have difficulty with access to water."

Van der Merwe said "the final straw" had been seeing springbok

with their ribs "clearly visible".

She intended contacting the Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Robeco Mabuza, about the issue and would ask her to visit the island "as a tourist".

The maximum skills under the Department of Arts and Culture.

Professor Les Fisherhill, director of the Animal Demography Unit at USF, whose students have done substantial research in the island's seabird population, is also seriously concerned.

"The carrying capacity of the island for grazers such as rabbits and fallow deer has been grossly exceeded (this summer), he said.

"The island looks like a desert, and rabbits I've been feeding four metres above the ground, climbing

among the top branches of the trees. They have eaten the bark off trees, and it remains to be seen if they have effectively been ring-barked, and will die.

"A fallow deer, which is primarily a grass eater, has been observed eating the twigs of a rabbit."

"The island ecosystem has taken huge strain this summer, and the path to recovery looks more complex than simply the arrival of the winter rains."

The bontebok population, which is of great conservation value because it is a pure strain of this species, uncontaminated by cross-breeding with closely related bleb-bok, has been hit particularly hard and numbers have crashed.

A count last April found 80 individual bontebok. Fifty were re-

moved last July and in September 21 were recorded.

Last week just two could be found.

Although the managers belatedly brought in some fodder for the mammals last week and have now also sent SA National Parks for assistance, this may be too late for the bontebok, which are exclusively grazers and do not take artificial feed.

The number of springbok has declined from a maximum of 43 in 2004 to 26 last year to just 12 this year, and the fallow deer population, which reached a maximum of 221 last year, is down to slightly more than 90 at present.

Rabbits were introduced to the island soon after Van Riebeeck landed at the Cape in 1662, and are

considered part of its cultural heritage. Their numbers were kept in check partly by the feral cat population, which also devastated seabird populations.

After delays by management during which flooding by the seabirds was severely disrupted, a cat eradication programme was instituted but it was stopped before all the cats were removed, reportedly also because of funding problems.

Van der Merwe said conservationists wanted the island's managers to institute a crisis plan immediately for the remaining mammals on the island and to develop an environmental management plan.

Robben Island Museum has not responded at the time of going to press.



PRESS RELEASE

Cape Argus

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NEWS

Rescue plan for starving animals

Experts offer advice, medicine and food for Robben Island's antelope

By JOHN YELD
Environment & Science Writer

There are no *Exita se koeksterters* yet but just about everything else edible to antelope is being used, as help for Robben Island's starving animals pours in.

The latest offers to help feed and manage game on the island, where the rabbit population explosion has devastated natural grazing, have come from the owner of Aquila private game reserve near Totius River, entrepreneur Searl Derman, who has pledged a massive R250 000 after personally confirming the disaster, and Darling-based satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys.

Uys contacted Peter Pentz, owner of the historic West Coast farm Groote Post, and offered to match the 100 bales of oat hay that Pentz had earlier promised.

Pentz said yesterday that the satirist had contacted him from Boston in the US and that he (Pentz) would be contacting the Robben Island Museum's conservation manager Shaun Davis to discuss delivery of the 200 bales that were produced on the farm.

Derman also contacted Davis last week immediately after reading about the animals' plight in the Cape Argus and offered his boats, conservation expertise, game capture staff and equipment, helicopters, animal feed, vitamin blocks, veterinary services and medicines, among other assistance valued at a quarter of a million rands.

"It might seem like a lot of money and effort, as the total value of the two (remaining) bontebok and 20 springbok is under R20 000," he explained.

"But I'd be honoured to be involved in saving the original bloodlines of these historic and endangered animals, and limit



DESPERATE: Clearly, the buck doesn't stop here. Hungry deer like this one have been 'raiding' staff houses on Robben Island in search of food. Satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys has pledged 100 bales of oat hay for them
Picture: SEARL DERMAN

any further bloodshed at a World Heritage Site of such great significance right on my doorstep."

They'd been shocked at what they'd found, he added. "Reports were received from staff on the island of animals raiding houses and dustbins and eating everything they could find, including newspaper and any other form of paper they could find."

"As experienced conservationists, we (Derman and Simon Trickey of ARC) were shocked at the state of vegetation on the island, which is pretty much devastated. "A distinct browse-line was visible on all the trees at a

height of four feet (just over one metre).

"Rabbits were seen in abundance and they have completely destroyed whatever grazing the island had."

Derman said the springbok they had seen had been mostly in "stage two" of starvation (on a scale of five), while the fallow deer were worse off, varying between stages two and three.

As soon as the feed had been introduced, all the downwind antelope had come running, some from as far as one kilometre away, he said.

"It was a very rewarding and humbling experience for

us to witness the reaction of the animals. At one point, between 200 and 300 fallow deer were crowding around a single feeding station."

Derman said he was prepared to spend R250 000 to fund an urgent compromise plan that would satisfy the conflicting demands about the island's antelope population.

In terms of the island's approved management plan, the 5 000-plus rabbits must all be removed, as well as the several hundred remaining fallow deer, apart from a very small group of about 10 that the museum authority wants to retain for cultural-historical

reasons. Derman said that it would not be possible to do "capture and removal" of the animals at present because they were too weak.

"Move them and they will die. You can't move them until they're in a better condition," he said.

His detailed plan includes intensive short-term feeding at the half-dozen water points used by the animals and then using various game capture techniques to move them to appropriate holding areas while the veld recovers.

"The animals are so hungry that this will be easy and quick - in just 30 days we can make a hell of an impact. If action is taken quickly, the situation can be rescued."

However, the rehabilitation of the island's environment is liable to take a long time, and there are unfortunately no short cuts.

It would be necessary to feed the animals for this entire period and would be "very costly", he added.

Derman said Davis and the other island conservation staff were enthusiastic about his plan and he hoped to persuade the museum's senior management, who have approved a weekly food drop, to buy into it quickly.

Derman also said that he was prepared to pay for mass sterilisations to avoid the need for further culling of the deer.

While he conceded that CapeNature had indicated it would not issue permits for live deer to be removed from the island, he argued that no one had yet negotiated all the options thoroughly with the conservation authority.

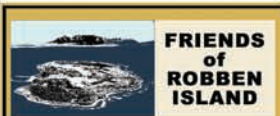
● Derman can be contacted at Searl@aquillasafari.com or visit the reserve's website at www.aquillasafari.com

john.yeld@el.co.za



PRESS RELEASE- ADVERTISING

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The implementation of a feeding and capture program, a vegetation and land management program, as well as the relocation of the animals to sanctuaries (permit pending) could cost in excess of R2 million.

Derman, owner of Aquila Private Game Reserve has pledged R250 000 and invites: "Friends of Robben Island", animal lovers, conservationists, eco-enthusiasts, proud Capetonians and the like, to visit Aquila's conservation page at: www.aquillasafari.com where they can monitor the situation and pledge donations whether it be: cash, vegetables and bread, animal feed, medical supplies, veterinary services, fuel for boats and vehicles, building and fencing materials, a much needed quad bike and trailer, a vehicle trailer, steel wire, canvas and poles for capture boma materials, water pipes, water pumps and tanks, salaries for conservationists and game capture staff.

"It might seem like a lot of money and effort to some in order to save a few hundred antelope and rabbits. However I'd be honored to be involved in saving the original bloodlines of these historic and endangered animals, and limit any further bloodshed and overgrazing impact on the land, at a world heritage sight of such great significance right on my doorstep." - Searl Derman



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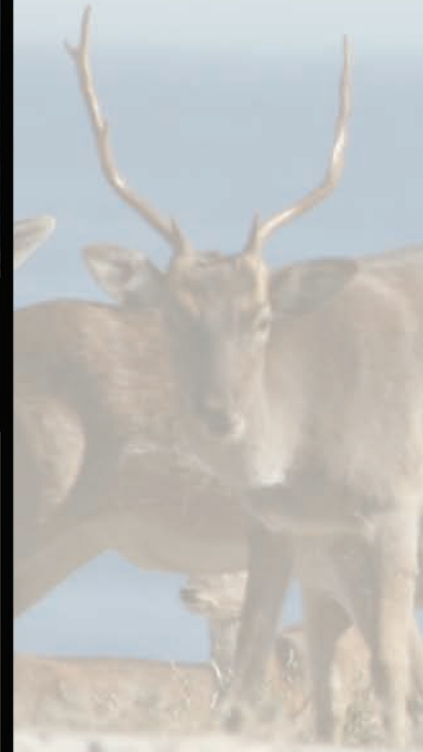
AQUILA ANIMAL RESCUE AND CONSERVATION CENTRE
(ASSOCIATION INCORPORATED UNDER SECTION 21)

CATEGORIES:

Best Overall Environmental Management System

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Introduction/ Summary to Aquila Animal Rescue and Conservation Centre and Searl Derman

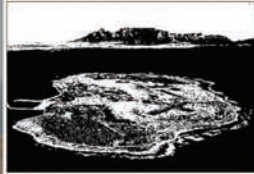
Searl Derman was born in Cape Town, South Africa and attended boarding school in the Karoo where weekends spent in nearby towns like Oudshoorn, Prince Albert, De Rust and Klarstroom inspired his passion for the outdoors and Africa's wildlife.

2008 was a significant milestone of Aquila's history when upon hearing of the plight of wildlife starving on Robben Island, Searl Derman immediately took it upon himself to help by raising awareness and funds to assist the animals with the support of Robben Island Management. Within days Searl Derman and his wildlife team had visited to assess the problems and started to ship vital nutritional feed costing hundreds of thousands of Rands as well as veterinary assistance. International awareness was created due to his campaign and a thorough plan has been put into place to not only save the wildlife but also rehabilitate the eco-system.

Searl Derman, who had owned a dormant section 21 company for several years felt that this was the right time to launch Aquila Animal Rescue and Conservation Centre - 2004/011009/08

Searl Derman has gained an impeccable reputation as one of the most inspiring entrepreneurs in South Africa featured as personality of the week and hailed as 'Champion of the Poor' by the Argus newspaper based on Aquila Private Game Reserve being the single biggest job creator/employer in the Touwsriver area, one of the hardest hit communities in the Western Cape as a result of the 'railway town' closing several years ago and as a result of Aquila Private Game Reserve, the community is benefiting on many levels through ongoing sustainable community projects. He is known for his innovative approach to both business and people.

His main focus is on Job creation, Conservation and Tourism.



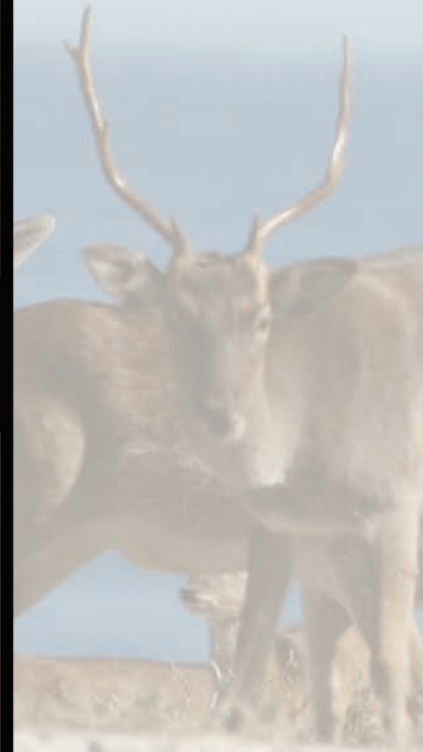
OF
ROBBEN ISLAND



SUCCESS OVER THE PAST YEAR (2008) – Robben Island Assistance –

ROBBEN ISLAND ASSISTANCE

On the 29 April 2008 Searl Derman, the owner of Aquila Private Game Reserve came across a newspaper article headlining how the fallow deer and rabbits were starving on Robben Island. Searl Derman immediately contacted the appropriate authorities asking how he could assist them. Searl Derman then set out to meet with Robben Island, and the other involved parties in order to find a solution to the problem at hand.





SUCCESS OVER THE PAST YEAR (2008) – Robben Island Assistance –

On the 28 May 2008 Searl Derman was asked to provide a detailed plan as to how he envisaged the operation to take place. To follow is an amended extract from a letter directed to Paul Langa who was the Director of Robben Island Museum:

Thank you for your letter dated 28th May 2008. Aquila's assistance on Robben Island has been an absolute pleasure. Please be assured that it will be ongoing.

I trust you are aware of the recent letter from the SPCA ensuring us of their support. At a meeting held on the 28th May 2008, Shaun Davis will be able to confirm the SPCA's total buy in to our plan, as quoted by them, "it seems to be the only possible, viable and affordable solution."

In order to give you an envisaged timeframe: We plan to supplement feed for 3 weeks (smaller quantities more frequently) in order to get the animals to identify vehicles and people as a stress free feeding solution.

Immediately thereafter, we plan to erect 2 passive capture boma's at the rate of 1 side every 10 days.

The capture of all the animals could take two or three weeks. During this period, transport crates built to IATA specifications will be manufactured at Aquila.

Once the animals are captured, we would need to hold them in the holding camp for at least two weeks, whilst we boost their condition before handling. Which would mean that it would be an ongoing process of catching up to 40 animals every 3 weeks (min), intensive feeding, medical care and desensitizing them to human activity.

We would need a minimum of 4 weeks to eradicate internal and external parasites, vaccinate animals (should State Vet feel it's necessary), and increase the general condition of the antelope. This is in order to give them the best chance of surviving the sterilization and proposed transportation. During this time they will also have a lot of interaction with people, and this will also allow them more time to become accustomed to people around them, and the noise and strange smells that accompany people, which will increase their chances of survival during transportation.





SUCCESS OVER THE PAST YEAR (2008) – Robben Island Assistance –

We have a commitment from several veterinary surgeons that will assist us with sterilization or contraception of the antelope. Sterilization will obviously take a lot longer.

Once the animals' condition is in a better state, and they have recovered from the sterilization operation, the animals could be removed from the island by boat, helicopter or plane as long as this does not interfere with the bird life as approved by MCM, and will take approximately two weeks.

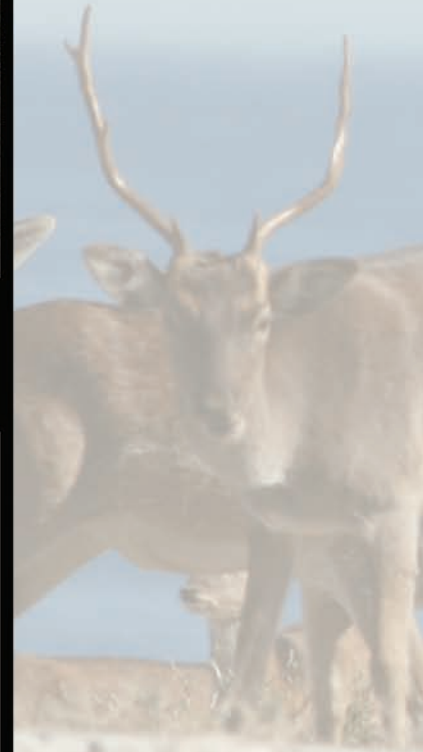
I would estimate this whole procedure to take 6–12 months, however, most of the stress will be off the land much sooner.

As far as the rabbits are concerned, our plan is to manufacture 5–10 portable traps that could be disassembled for transportation. Each rabbit trap will be designed to catch as many rabbits at one time as possible. The estimated manufacturing time is +/- 3 weeks.

I would also estimate that we would be able to catch between 10 and 50 rabbits per trap per day in the beginning. However, as we catch more rabbits, so it will become more difficult to catch the remaining rabbits. The capture of the rabbits could take several months. If a handful of rabbits are left, then the same problem will rear its head again in a few years. We are hoping to use existing buildings on the island accommodate the trapped rabbits under the watchful eye of the SPCA to ensure the rabbits welfare. I am in a position to help with the capture and feeding of the rabbits, however, inevitably it would be up to Western Cape Nature Conservation (WCNC) to issue permits releasing them off the island. I understand and respect their concerns and in an attempt to remain apolitical yet, whole heartedly committed, I would offer to assist with the expensive sterilization or (contraception) of the rabbits if it would save their lives. Regrettably, I doubt that sufficient adequate sanctuaries will be found before either the feeding resources (to feed 5000 rabbits) or adequate accommodation on the island is exhausted. Only at that stage would culling be an option over starvation.

The above timeframes are conservative and I believe that if we are lucky we could remove 50% of the rabbits within the first 3 weeks. A further 25%–40% within the next 3 weeks thereafter.

This would be the fastest possible way to relieve the current overgrazing stress on the island.





SUCCESS OVER THE PAST YEAR (2008) – Robben Island Assistance –

All deadlines are approximates and not guaranteed. The above is also weather dependent as well as limited to the infrastructure, accommodation and vehicles that we would need available on the island.

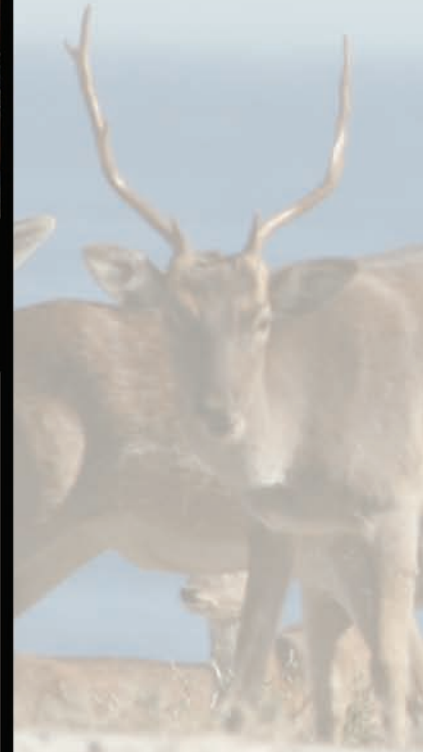
Douw Grobbelaar one of the world's most famous and qualified vets has committed to overseeing the capture, contraception and sterilization process. Douw Grobbelaar and I were instrumental in capturing the elusive Rondevlei hippo that escaped approximately 3 years ago. We also worked on the 'ground breaking' internationally publicized experiment at Phinda Game Reserve in KZN, where along with the USA Disneyland vets, the sterilisation of wild elephants (by means of darting from helicopters and operating on the elephants) as a viable means of contraception was attempted.

In addition to the +/- R250 000 that I initially committed to (almost spent), I would need to immediately commit to another +/- R350 000 of capture equipment specific to antelope and portable mass capture traps for the rabbits. As the consensus is that time is of the essence and in order to progress, I would therefore require a firm commitment of your support for 1 year (although as presented I expect almost immediate pressure off the land and the whole operation should take under 6 months), addressed to myself as soon as possible.

I trust that as agreed by the SPCA you appreciate that this is the most; humane, affordable, viable and the fastest solution with the best publicity possible for Robben Island. I trust that you can also appreciate that should I spend R600 000 to save the animals, and absorb the risk and the responsibility for the project and the animals, I would need your firm commitment and support.

Further to this Searl Derman received a letter from Robben Island confirming that the above plan had been accepted by Robben Island. Searl Derman through ARC a section 21 Company owned by Searl Derman, is raising funds in order to facilitate the project. To date Aquila Private Game Reserve has already financed over R250 000 to this project. ARC intends to build a raptor rehabilitation centre, as well as an in house veterinary clinic to assist with the many wild animals, ranging from baboons, injured or orphaned, caracals etc that are constantly brought to Aquila Private Game Reserves doorstep.

Besides the huge amount of positive media coverage, Searl Derman has been acknowledged on local radio stations including Good Hope FM, 567 Cape Talk, KFM, Bush Radio and tv such as Take 5 at Indaba, Carte Blanche and CNBC as well as multiple newspapers, magazines and internet sites worldwide.

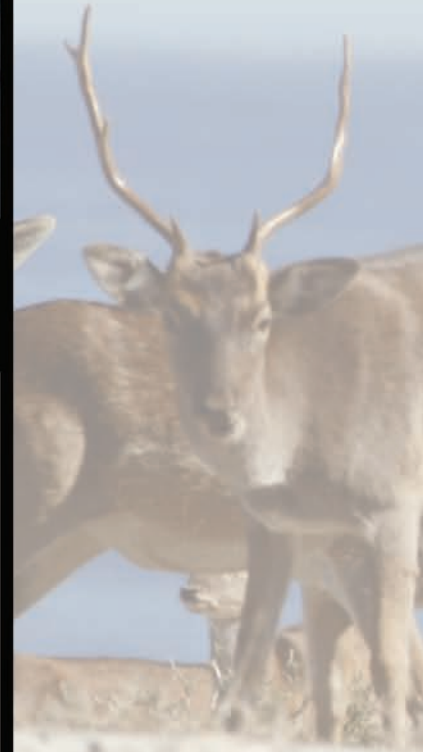




SUCCESS OVER THE PAST YEAR (2008) – Job Creation and Community Upliftment –

JOB CREATION AND COMMUNITY UPLIFTMENT

As the land across the road from Aquila Private Game Reserve is currently being developed to house the new conservation projects of ARC like the cheetah project, rescuing of canned lions and rapture education centre this construction is further providing employment in the Touwriver community.



2 06 2008

Cape Argus

2 06 2008

Island deer can move – but not the rabbits

CapeNature cool on rescue plan

By JOHN YELD
Environment & Science Writer

Robben Island's beleaguered fallow deer may be taken off the island to a properly fenced sanctuary that already houses this species, but the removal of live rabbits – one of the world's worst invasive species – is a "no-no".

That's the word from Dr Kas Hamman, biodiversity director of the province's statutory nature conservation agency CapeNature which issues permits for the capture and transport of all animals in the province.

His statement comes as a private initiative is under way to save the alien deer, rabbits and other mammal species from starvation, after the island's natural vegetation was devastated by an over-population of animals and a lack of rain.

This initiative is being led by Searle Derman of the Aquila private game reserve near Touws River, who has pledged R230 000 and who last week took another large food drop that included vitamin blocks out to the island.

Derman wants to feed the animals regularly so that they will be better able to withstand the stress of a possible capture and move to the mainland. The feeding will also habituate them to a capture boma to be built around the feeding points.

Hamman said in a statement that CapeNature had been liaising with the Robben Island Museum authorities for



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and rabbit populations and subsequent over-utilisation of natural ecosystems on the island.

Fallow deer were known to breed and spread freely and were "infamously difficult" to control once a population had become feral, Hamman pointed out.

"There have unfortunately been numerous introductions of fallow deer into South Africa and the Western Cape and they are now well established as feral populations at several localities.

"There is also growing evidence that fallow deer populations are rapidly expanding into many natural Karoo (Karoo-type) environments."

Although CapeNature did not generally advocate the translocation of invasive alien game species within the province, it had told the Robben Island Museum that it would allow the deer to be moved, subject to strict conditions, Hamman said.

These included that properties to which they were moved were not currently targeted by CapeNature for a stewardship conservation arrangement.

A habitat assessment had to be provided that demonstrated that little or no environmental degradation would be caused to the natural habitat. Benefi-

ence and no future trade in live fallow deer would be allowed.

CapeNature "strongly" advised the Robben Island Museum management to either cull the deer; "in a belated effort to stem the tide of the damage to the island's vegetation and wildlife and immediate commencement of rehabilitation of the veld" or alternatively remove them, Hamman said.

CapeNature was adamant that the rabbits could not be brought off the island alive, he added.

He pointed out that, in 1859, just 24 wild rabbits had been released into the wild in Australia, yet by 1926 their population had exploded to an estimated 10 billion.

"Although perceived by some as an ideal pet, the European rabbit is listed as one of the world's five worst invasive species and is regarded by some as being one of the world's five worst invasive species."

Rabbits were responsible for serious erosion problems as they ate virtually all plants available to them – including roots and seeds – which left the topsoil exposed and vulnerable to erosion, Hamman said.

"This removal of topsoil is devastating to the land as it may take hundreds of years to regenerate the topsoil to its original condition.

"We strongly recommend that the most effective, efficient and least damaging solution for the removal of rabbits from the island from a biodiversity

Reprieve offered for the Robben Island fallow deer

NATASHA JOSEPH

ROBBEN ISLAND'S burgeoning alien fallow deer population should be culled, or removed and relocated according to stringent conditions, says, CapeNature.

The conservation authority said in a statement that the island's management was ultimately responsible for decisions about its alien deer and rabbit populations.

CapeNature's statement follows reports that animals on the island, a World Heritage Site, are starving to death because of a lack of vegetation.

A large feral rabbit population has been blamed for this.

CapeNature's director of biodiversity, Kas Hamman, said the island would be allowed to move deer from the island if certain conditions were met. Among these were that:

- The new habitat have resident and legally acquired fallow deer

- The new habitat may not be in an area targeted by CapeNature for a stewardship conservation agreement.

- A habitat assessment must demonstrate that "little or no environmental degradation" would be caused by the introduction of the island's fallow deer.

As a "responsible conservation authority", CapeNature said it "cannot allow, nor support, any new introductions of fallow deer within the ... province through agreeing to new 'fallow deer sanctuaries'".

CapeNature said it "strongly advises" that the island cull its fallow deer population, "in a belated effort to stem the tide of the damage", or arrange for the removal of the deer according to the conservation authority's stringent guidelines.

It also advised that the most "effective, efficient and least damaging solution" to the rabbit problem was to have the rabbits "culled on site".

Robben Island's environmental co-ordinator, Shaun Davis, said CapeNature was one of the island's stakeholders, and any advice it offered on the natural environment and conservation would be considered.

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Mr. Derman was given the honour of giving the official speech at Madiba's 90th birthday in front of South Africa's most prestigious leaders and celebrities.

Mr. Derman was also honoured to be invited to plant a tree on the island for his major contribution in saving Robben Island's World Heritage Status.

18 July 2008