

Disaster on Friday 13th

We had been working hard to strengthen 41km of our 98km perimeter fence in readiness for reintroducing cheetah to Komsberg East. Then, on Friday 13th July 2012, disaster struck.

Komsberg is at an altitude of 1,721m above sea level. We are used to occasional snow, ice, and bitterly cold winds during the winter months. But, this time, the onslaught of nature was genuinely a freak event. Some 35km of our 2.4m high game fence came down as a result of tonnes of freezing rain turning to ice and fixing itself to the wires and metal droppers and Y-posts. Astonishingly, the *horizontal* icicles were 200mm across. The normal sheep fence of neighbours also came down, something not seen before during the past 70 years.

Wussy and Vicky felt like crying for perhaps 20 seconds when they saw what had happened. Then they rapidly got to work, first propping up the huge length of fence that had come down. It didn't look pretty, but four days later it was done. Thankfully, no animals got out.

As more permanent repairs were being undertaken, we decided to strengthen the fence still further by adding another 2,000 metal Y-posts and 380 wooden posts. Being up in the mountains, digging holes is rarely straightforward and we usually hit rock. We needed help.

We have deliberately not made a track for vehicle access around the fence, unless one was previously there, as we want to conserve the maximum amount of vegetation. So carrying a rock drill *and* a generator - plus all the fencing materials - simply wasn't feasible. Iain, back in England, did his homework and found out that it was possible to get a rock drill and breaker combination, together with an inbuilt petrol tank. Perfect.

It got better still. We next found out that the Swedish company, Atlas Copco, produced such a piece of equipment: the Cobra Combi. And the parent company had a South African partner company. We already knew Atlas Copco had an excellent reputation for reliable, well-engineered equipment; you couldn't get better.

So Jonathan contacted Atlas Copco, who agreed to help by donating the necessary equipment. Everyone was brilliant and couldn't have been more helpful. As well as the rock drill itself, they even made sure that all the bits and pieces that we might need were provided. And a representative came all the way from Johannesburg to deliver everything and give us basic training.



We know that the key to our success is attitude and we are world leaders in this respect. Part of this attitude is “never give up” - obviously helpful when catastrophe hits. Equally, Atlas Copco have demonstrated world-class generosity and support. We cannot thank everyone concerned enough and hope that this is conveyed through these words.

The hard work is already well underway - with “just” two women doing it all, working non-paid. But these are no ordinary women. Vicky, part of Wildlife For All’s team for 16 years and counting, insists that “you need ‘balls’ to do this work”. Both Vicky and Wussy can carry 50kg rolls of fencing wire for up to 4km in distance away; then they start work. So carrying and operating the 27kg Cobra Combi was always realistic. And, for the record, it’s about 30kg when you include the metal drill bit and a full tank of fuel.



Vicky - our drill operator.

Once all of the repairs and strengthening are completed, which is easier said than done, then the next huge task is to electrify 41km of fence - a practical and legal requirement for the reintroduction of a major predator such as cheetah. This includes a trip line, just inside the fence, held up by metal stakes 5m apart. Again, a lot of work and drilling because Komsberg is a big place - something that is important if nature is to flourish.

Endnote: We are realists and not at all superstitious. The Friday 13th timing was purely coincidental!