

How to do root canal on a leopard...

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By ZELDA VENTER

What is worse than a bear with a sore head? A leopard with a sore tooth.

But it all seemed to be in a day's work for the staff at Onderstepoort's dental clinic on Friday as they performed a root canal on a hairier than normal patient - and one that needed to be handled with extra care.

The patient was a wild male leopard which was discovered two weeks ago in a eucalyptus tree by a resident of Boschkop, east of Pretoria.

Clinical vet Dr Adrian Tordiffe of Pretoria zoo assisted members of the Tshwane Nature Conservation to dart the animal.

The big cat, which was promptly named Ingwe ("leopard" in Sotho) was taken to the zoo to ensure its safety, until it can be relocated back into the wild.

Tordiffe said the leopard was stressed at the time and had to be placed in isolation for its own safety.

Ingwe's stress levels were extremely high during the first week and he didn't eat anything. It was only during this week that it started eating. The plan was to release him on Monday at Dinokeng, but Tordiffe said they then discovered that he had fractured a tooth during his stay at the zoo.

He explained that this unfortunately sometimes happened when wild animals were kept in captivity and they tried to escape. The ideal thing would be to release them immediately, but it is not always possible as there are various arrangements to be made beforehand.

Tordiffe realised the fracture would cause the animal significant pain and that it would become more severe once the root canal became infected. "It can also influence the animal's long-term chances of survival," he said.

With this in mind, it was decided that it was time for the leopard to visit the dentist. The anaesthetised cat was transported from the zoo to Onderstepoort, where Steenkamp and his team sorted out the tooth within an hour.

Steenkamp performed the root canal and filled the tooth cavity on the 60kg animal with the normal white cement used on humans.

Steenkamp said it was important that they tended to the fractured upper canine, as the nerves and blood vessels were exposed, which exposed it to infection. His task was made easier, he said, by the fact that it was a fresh fracture.

Although Ingwe will now have a slightly shorter upper canine, it will not hamper him at all in his hunting, Steenkamp said. He explained that they couldn't put a crown on an elongated tooth as the material available is not strong enough to resist all the forces which a leopard is likely to encounter.

Steenkamp said he had in the past performed several similar procedures on leopards and they were all successful. He was confident that Ingwe would have many happy hunting years ahead of him with his newly fixed tooth.



With the big cat in dreamland, Dr Gerhard Steenkamp tends to the leopard's fractured upper canine. Picture : Sarah Makoe

Ingwe was later transported to the Mongena private game farm within Dinokeng. When he came to, he did not show any effects of his minor surgery.

He was left with a hearty lunch before exploring his new environment.

The leopard was fitted with a combination radio and cellphone collar to monitor his progress.

It is estimated that he is three to four years old and it is unclear where he came from. Tordiffe suspected that he could have been displaced by other territorial males.- Pretoria News



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