

Pups in Peril

African wild dogs are in dire straits. Only 700 packs of these charismatic apex predators remain on the fringes of the African savannah, pushed out of their natural habitat by human settlements. The deadly rabies virus, spread by domestic dogs, is one of the biggest threats to African wild dogs. In 1991, African wild dogs tragically lost their strong hold in Serengeti National Park; the blame was quickly pushed upon not only rabies, but the vaccine that should have saved them from it.

Dr Rosie Woodroffe and her team of experts at the Zoological Society of London refused to believe that the vaccine wiped out the wild dogs of the Serengeti. To clear its name, a wild dog from the Bronx Zoo in New York City was volunteered as a guinea pig to test the vaccine. Not only did he survive, but with an elevated double dose he was much less likely to catch rabies. After this small success, the trial was tentatively rolled out in the wild back in Africa. Contrary to the beliefs of the vaccine sceptics, the vaccinated wild dogs thrived, surviving better than wild dogs that weren't treated. The vaccine's reputation now restored, it can be put back to practical use.

It has been proposed that as part of the conservation effort to save the African wild dog, their domestic contemporaries should also be vaccinated to halt the spread of the virus. Rabies doesn't only affect wild and pet dogs, but can prove fatal for humans too. By vaccinating people's pets, conservationists hope that, with one move, they can not only save African wild dogs from extinction, but also save human lives.

Breif: A 300-word news-in-brief piece suitable for a newspaper such as The Guardian, based solely on an academic research seminar