

WHITE, FREE PRIDE



□ A female white lion, one of seven that were released at the Rhino & Lion Nature Reserve, emerges from the transport. PICTURE: ETIENNE CREUX

White lions get a taste of freedom

BARRY BATEMAN

A pride of white lions was for the first time in South Africa released to roam freely and breed in a protected area this week.

Seven of the rare animals, aged between 18 and 24 months, were released on to about 100ha of land in the Rhino & Lion Nature Reserve near the Cradle of Humankind world heritage site.

The reserve is already home to eight other white lions, but they are all kept in enclosures for breeding.

Reserve owner Ed Hern said the off-

spring in this pride would be left with the parents and be brought up as part of the pride, contrary to what currently happens when cubs are taken away from the mother and hand-reared. "We will leave the pride, if the offspring are going to die we won't interfere. This is because we want to see if they survive in a wild scenario," he said.

Hern said the pride was made up of five females and two males, all of which came from different gene pools.

He said the pride came from Mafokeng, where they started putting them together about two years ago. "You have to watch the genes. You can't

introduce a new male to the pride at a later stage, they have to grow up together or they'll kill each other," he said.

This meant that breeding would take place naturally and safely within the next six to 12 months.

He said because of their colour, white lions could only live in captivity as they were unable to camouflage themselves as other lion species did.

Hern said the number of white lions picked up rapidly when a high price was placed on these animals. He said there were between 500 and 600 white lions worldwide.