

‘I never wanted to be a princess – becoming a veterinarian was my dream,’ says UP lecturer and wildlife specialist Dr Katja Koepfel

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If a wild animal is in distress anywhere in the country, veterinarian Dr Katja Koepfel, a senior lecturer in Wildlife at the University of Pretoria (UP), is likely to be called upon to help. As the go-to person who rescues animals, she can be called upon at any time of the day.

“I decided that I wanted to become a vet when I was four years old,” says the German-born vet. “I never wanted to be a princess or an astronaut – becoming a veterinarian was my dream.” She spent her school holidays working with her uncle who was an equine veterinarian in Germany, and eventually began studying Veterinary Science at Glasgow University. Dr Koepfel started out working with small animals and horses, but soon realised that her passion was wildlife.

“I came to South Africa in 2002 to further my education in wildlife medicine, and completed my MSc in wildlife in 2004 at UP; my master’s was about the use of probiotics in cheetahs,” she explains. After working in private practice, she joined the Johannesburg Zoo as a veterinarian, and later became Head Veterinarian, until 2015. That same year, she received her diploma in Zoo Health Management from the European College of Zoological Medicine, before taking up a lecturing position at UP in 2016.



Dr Katja Koepfel with one of the black-footed wild cat kittens she helped deliver by Caesarean section last year.

Another field of interest for Dr Koeppel is conservation medicine. She was involved in the rescue of lesser flamingos at Kamfers Dam near Kimberley last year, and helped deliver black-footed wild cat kittens by Caesarean section after their mother suffered birth complications. These cats are on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List, meaning there are very few of them left. Dr Koeppel also treated a lion who had to undergo four radiation therapy sessions at a local hospital for an aggressive tumour on its nose. "I have been involved in several conservation projects and am passionate about carnivore, avian and primate medicine," she says.

As a clinician, she treats all wildlife "patients" that arrive at the **Faculty of Veterinary Science** on Onderstepoort Campus. "We offer referral services for difficult cases, as we have specialised equipment such as a computerised tomography (CT) machine, which we can fit even a lion in," says Dr Koeppel. "I enjoy seeing animals recover, and I especially enjoy being able to release them back into the wild. The opening of the new wildlife facility at Onderstepoort was definitely the highlight this year."

In addition to her clinical duties, Dr Koeppel is also working on her PhD, which is about an oral rabies vaccine bait for black-backed jackals. "My family helps me to catch jackal for my PhD project," she says with a smile. She is also mentoring five master's and two MMedVet students; MMedVet is a degree that involves clinical training to become a wildlife specialist at the UP.

Dr Koeppel believes that you can achieve your dreams if you work hard and persevere. "Sometimes it is a lot harder for a woman to reach her goals, especially if it's a male-dominated career. But if you work hard, you can reach your goals. When I started out as a wildlife vet, I knew of only five other female wildlife veterinarians in South Africa."

Her advice to young women who want to get into careers in science and veterinary science? "Pay attention in school, and really focus on Maths and Science so that you are prepared for university," she says. "I think it helps to have a mentor who will assist you to fulfil your dreams."

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