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Boost for Quagga project

SA Parks Board joins team to rebreed extinct species

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The project to rebreed the quagga, an animal thought to have become extinct more than a century ago, has had a boost with South African National Parks putting their weight behind the bid.

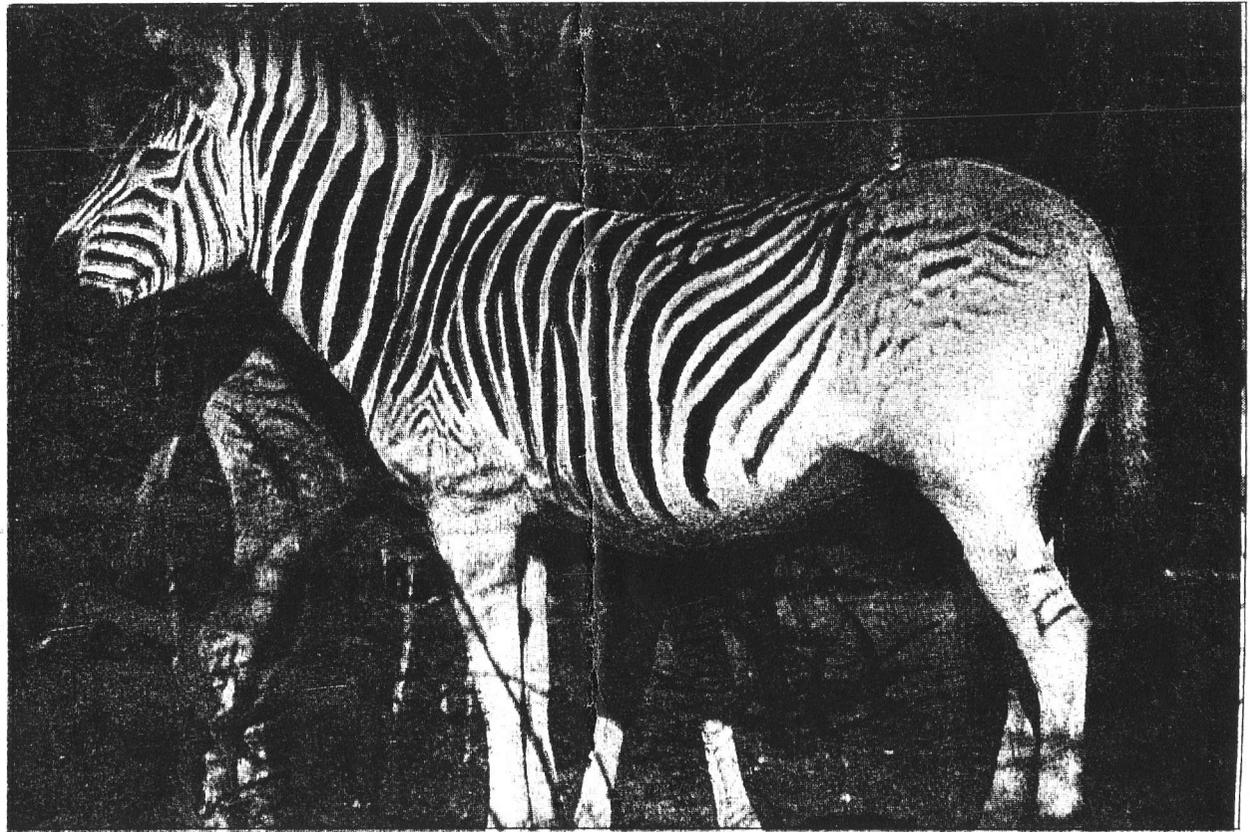
SA National Parks and the Quagga Project will become partners after an agreement signed at the South African Museum today. The National Parks will help with the capture and transport of the animals to different reserves and between different breeding groups.

The Quagga Project started in 1987 and aims to rebreed the brown, partially striped quagga that was believed to have become extinct in 1883. The 70 animals are kept at various reserves in the Western Cape – on the Groote Schuur Estate, at the National Accelerator Centre at Faure and near Wellington.

The quagga was genetically almost identical to southern African zebras – the main difference being that the light stripes on quaggas were ochre to brown instead of white and they had no stripes on their legs and rump.

Reinhold Rau, co-ordinator of the Quagga Project, said: “The agreement will help both us and the National Parks. It will give our project much more of an official standing. National Parks are very keen to re-introduce the quagga into its original distribution area, which is the Karoo and southern Free State. In return, they will carry the cost of transporting the animals.”

The project tries to breed quaggas similar to the extinct ones by using ani-



LEON LESTRADE

Brand new: Charlene, a mare in the Quagga Project's breeding programme, with her shy filly at the National Accelerator Centre at

mals with quagga characteristics – brownish colour and fewer stripes. Through selective breeding they have already come very close to the original.

Mr Rau said: “There was quite some variation in the quaggas. Some had stripes on their hindquarters too and were a lighter brown. We have already

bred animals which come quite close to that – we only want fewer stripes on the legs. It will take longer to get to the darker brown one without stripes on the hindquarters.”

Mr Rau, a taxidermist at the SA Museum, decided to rebreed the quagga after conditioning five of the 23

remaining stuffed quaggas worldwide.

“When we started ... we had a lot of criticism and ridicule, because some ... considered the quagga to be a different species. However, it was found that the quagga's DNA is virtually identical to the plains zebras found throughout southern Africa.”