

CHEETAH IN ZIMBABWE

The cheetah is considered a "problem animal" by 80% of farmers in Zimbabwe, and many of them see no benefit in allowing it to remain on their land, according to Viv Wilson, reporting on a national survey for presentation to the National Parks Board. His reluctant conclusion is that licenced safari hunting has to be permitted in designated areas, but a large area should become a strict cheetah preserve, and a breeding centre should be established.

He says farmers feel cheetah are a threat to their livestock and will not tolerate the loss. A small number of farmers consider the cheetah a "nuisance" because it kills young and immature wild antelope, which they wish to preserve for their economic value.

Furthermore, Viv reports "continued antagonism" by farmers towards staff of the National Parks Department and international wildlife authorities, especially CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), who work to protect cheetah.

He quotes rancher B.K. Cawood of Mwenezi as writing to him: "Deaths of calves since the beginning of December to 25 March 1987 were 15 calves with another five badly mauled. In the 1984/85 calving season I lost 32 calves out of a total of 130, over 25%. Is it not time for the 'ardent conservationists' to put their money where their mouths are and help pay for our cost of feeding the cheetah in order to ensure their survival. To be honest, I can no longer afford these losses and will now start destroying all vermin."

Viv points out that the cheetah is a "specially protected species" in Zimbabwe, as well as being internationally regarded as "endangered", yet farmers are quietly and illegally killing cheetah without the authority and knowledge of the National Parks staff. The carcasses are buried.

The survey was undertaken following presentation of a paper entitled "A Case to Permit the Hunting of Cheetah by High-Paying Foreign Sportsmen" in November 1985 by Dr Graham Child, then Director of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (see CAT NEWS 4, p.9). Viv argued that cheetah were not as numerous as suggested.

While he found it impossible to give accurate figures of cheetah numbers, Viv expressed the opinion that the population could be broken down as follows:

1. Northwest Zimbabwe	ca.	120
2. Midlands	ca.	30
3. Southern Zimbabwe	ca.	250
4. Middle Zambezi Valley	ca.	30
5. Gonarezhou	ca.	20
6. Other areas	ca.	20
	<u>Total</u>	<u>470</u>

Viv's recommendations are:

1. It would disastrous to remove cheetah from the "Specially Protected Species" list as it would appear as if Zimbabwe were not interested or had no concern for such an endangered species.

2. The farmer who suffers stock losses should be compensated. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management should allow a limited number of cheetah to be shot on licence to registered safari operators. The Department should apply to CITES for a quota so that skins of cheetah shot on licence can be imported into the USA, Europe etc.

3. Whenever and wherever possible cheetah should be captured and used to establish a breeding centre. The centre would ensure the survival of the species in captivity with the possibility of reintroduction to the wild if it were ever necessary. Viv offered facilities at the Chipangali Wildlife Orphanage in Bulawayo, of which he is the Director, for the breeding centre.

4. A large area should be set aside for cheetah where no hunting or capture etc is carried out, and where, even if some stock losses do occur, no licences are issued to shoot the offending cheetah. A suitable area would be the northwestern part of Zimbabwe between the Victoria Falls Road and the Botswana border and from the Zambezi River to the southern boundary of the Hwange National Park, including the Ngamo and Sikume forest reserves.

5. More detailed research should be undertaken as cheetah behaviour can vary in different areas. The proposed study areas should be:

a) Northwest Zimbabwe as an area with an undisturbed cheetah population, where there is abundance of wild animals and some domestic stock.

b) Southeast and southwest Lowveld as an area of maximum utilisation of the species, where cheetah should be hunted on licence by safari operators, captured for breeding programmes, and shot on permit as a stock killer.

6. No safari hunting should be allowed in the Midland area in view of the very small cheetah population. But if cheetah kill livestock, a special permit should be issued by the Department to shoot the animal, as is the case at present.

In a letter accompanying his report Viv wrote: "I personally hate the idea of having to "shoot" the animal, but cannot think of any other way in which we will ever be able to persuade farmers to see the its value. I believe that this hunting could be the thin end of the wedge and we would now have to watch our cheetah population very carefully".