

A Disastrous Cheetah Re-introduction in South Africa

An attempt to re-introduce captive-bred cheetahs into the Mthethomusha Game Reserve in South Africa turned into a disaster.

Two females were released: one was killed by hyaenas, and the second had to be taken back into captivity because it was starving. They proved totally unable to adapt to the wild.

The report which follows was recently published in International Cheetah Studbook 1993; it was compiled by Michele Ferguson:

The reserve, in the Eastern Transvaal and adjoining the Kruger National Park, has had much game introduced, including 17 elephant, 230 buffalo, 20 rhino, six lions and approximately six leopards, and is looked upon as a tourist site.

The cheetah were introduced for two reasons:

1. To perform the ecological role as large carnivores in the reserve. There is a male in the reserve and it was anticipated that these females would breed with him and thus increase the population.
2. To improve the game sightings of the cheetahs in the reserve, as a tourist operation is run from the Bongani Mountain Lodge within the reserve.

Two female cheetah were obtained from the Kapama Cheetah Centre in Hoedspruit, South Africa, and held in a boma in the reserve for eight weeks. These animals were sisters and about two years old. They had been captivity bred and raised, but they were not hand-raised or tame. They were very accustomed to people.

Both animals were fitted with transmitting devices which were placed in the stomach lining by Prof. Meltzer of Onderstepoort Veterinary Faculty, University of Pretoria.

Both animals were released on 14 May 1994. On release they were very cautious but attempted to stalk and chase a herd of impala without success. They were closely monitored for two days during which it was observed that they stayed together. If they became separated they called to each other until they found each other and licked each other in greeting. When they were out in the bushveld they appeared nervous and reacted to all sounds they heard. Being captive-bred and raised they were unable to select suitable habitat and stayed in dense bush. They made a few attempts to catch impala but due to inexperience were unsuccessful. They were also observed attempting to catch unsuitable prey species, such as nyala bulls in very thick vegetation on steep gradients.

They finally settled into the section of the reserve bordering the Kruger National Park – mainly as they had found a good source of water. They exhibited typical behaviour by selecting

some termite mounds to rest up. They did not catch any prey and had to be fed weekly. They were also observed trying to catch lizards and were extremely hungry. During this time they lost condition and appeared stressed. One female (03) injured her right front leg, presumably while chasing a potential prey – this was not a serious injury and did not hamper her movements.

During the time that they were in the reserve the sightings were excellent. This was mainly due to the lack of fear of people and their familiarity with vehicles. They often came very close to the vehicles in search of food. This was often very distressing for the guests, who could see how hungry the animals were, and for the cheetahs who did not get food. It was policy not to feed these animals when guests are present.

On 31 May 1994 Ranger Elvis Cibi tracked the two cheetah while on a morning game drive. At 0835 he found the remains of the female (03). It appeared that she had been killed and eaten by hyaenas. There were extensive spoor of more than one hyaena at the site and it is known that there is a hyaena den in close proximity to the site. The transmitter was retrieved (it had been chewed by the hyaenas) and the remains of the carcass removed.

This is an unfortunate incident, since both cheetah were valuable to the reserve – particularly in terms of game sightings for the guests. It is suspected that the cheetah wrongly assumed that the hyaenas were a potential prey species, i.e. they could hunt them, or both cheetah were caught unawares at night and were attacked by a group of hyaenas. As cheetah are diurnal their night vision is not exceptional and they are very vulnerable to attack by nocturnal animals.

Both these animals were totally inexperienced when released and highly dependent on us for a supply of food. During the two-week period in the reserve their inexperience, due to being captive animals all their lives, was clearly visible in their habitat and prey selection. They were open targets for a host of species as it was the first time that they were in the wild and having to fend for themselves.

In addition, most of Mthethomusha is unfavourable habitat for cheetah, having dense vegetation, rough terrain and limited water points. Of the limited open areas that cheetah favour, that are available in the reserve, there is the potential for competition with other species such as lion and the resident male cheetah.

On 4 June 1994 the remaining female cheetah was seen close to the main entrance gate of the reserve. She was extremely hungry and stayed close to the Ranger Gate Post. She was nervous and continued to call for her sister. Due to the risk of her escaping from the reserve when the gates were opened, it was decided to

try to lure her back into the reserve, using meat as a bait. This was unsuccessful.

A capture box and impala meat were stationed at the gate in the early morning of 5 June 1994. The cheetah had been scared away from the gate by a troop of baboons but had moved to the vicinity of the fence bordering the Kruger National Park. She was lured into the box with relative ease using impala meat. She appeared in poor condition – looking thin and dusty.

The remaining female was released into the boma without incident and was there for three days. During this time she was fed 4 kg of buffalo meat a day by one person and no game drive vehicles were permitted near the boma. Staff of the Kapama

Cheetah Centre came to fetch her. It was reported that she is recovering well and is in good health.

Although the cheetah introduction into Mthethemusha Game Reserve was not a success it did give some valuable information. It appears that female cheetahs do not adjust into the wild if they have been captive bred and raised. It has been suggested that a better approach to getting cheetah back into the reserve would be to introduce animals that have been captured in the wild and know how to fend for themselves.

(Report condensed from the International Cheetah Studbook, 1993)