

# Cheetahs on the Move from Namibia to South Africa

Large numbers of cheetahs, captured on farms in Namibia, are being translocated to reserves in South Africa. This year, the Africat conservation organization moved 16 cheetahs by air in one day to reserves at Phinda, Pilanesberg and Madikwe, and the Cheetah Conservation Fund has sent 15 to Umfolozi.

Namibia has the largest surviving concentration of cheetahs, estimated at around 2,500, or which over 90% live on farmland. In the past, large numbers were killed, but the two conservation organizations have encouraged farmers to live-trap cheetahs they want to get rid of, and to send them to holding camps, from which they can be exported.

Natal Parks Board and the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) have been collaborating for the past two years in a translocation program to re-establish a viable cheetah population in the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park. During the past two years, 11 other cheetahs have been relocated from Namibia in a similar manner. Although the total 22 cheetah from Namibia will not constitute a minimum viable population, they will expand the reserve's cheetah gene pool. These 11 cheetah are the last group of animals for translocation into the reserve.

Laurie Marker-Kraus of the CCF says that reintroduction of predators is not simple and straightforward as there are several

factors which must be considered, including size of area, prey base, and existing predator populations.

“Cheetahs are indigenous to Natal, but were exterminated from the province in the 1930s. Since 1965, two reintroductions of cheetahs have taken place into Hluhluwe Umfolozi in an effort to re-establish a population there. The present population is low and was estimated at approximately 25 cheetah.

“Top carnivores like the cheetah occur at low densities. This, together with genetic problems already found in the cheetah, leads to conservation problems compounded by the small size of protected reserves and parks. For this reason, the Natal Parks Board realizes that cooperation with all of southern Africa is critical in managing the cheetah for the future.

“This cooperative approach is known to biologists as a meta-population management strategy, which is extremely important when attempting to manage a small population for long-term survival. A small population is a group of animals that cannot retain enough genetic diversity due to their limited numbers, putting them at risk of extinction. Genetic diversity is important in order to survive inbreeding and random catastrophes over a short span of time, or to evolve adaptations and ensure survival over a long span of time.

“Once populations become small, this increases the potential for inbreeding due to the limited genetic material available within the population. This then leads to decreased reproduction and survival, and a reduced population growth rate. In meta-population management, various small populations and their genes are managed as one large unit.

“Meta-population management does not look at country borders, but rather what can be done cooperatively to assist the species. Therefore, by considering cheetah in southern Africa as

one population, a minimum viable population is possible.” The southern Africa meta-population can be maintained by translocation. Collaboration, communication and commitment in southern Africa can effectively promote a long-term future for the cheetah. The CCF will also collaborate with the Natal Parks Board extension officers in the distribution of cheetah information and educational materials to local communities. It is hoped that community awareness will aid in the overall conservation effort for the cheetah.”