

# Conservation of Namibia's Cheetahs and Lions

The southern African state of Namibia has more cheetahs than any other country, estimated to number between 2,000 and 3,000, about one-third of the total world population. But 90% of them live on farmlands, where they pose a threat to livestock and therefore suffer persecution. Laurie and Daniel Marker-Kraus, directors of the Cheetah Conservation Fund, suggest that more than 10,000 cheetahs may have been killed on farms or exported to zoos and captive breeding centres in the past 20 years, reducing the Namibian population by around 50%.

There are many fewer lions – 320-340 in 1994, according to government biologist Hu Berry – and they are found mainly in Etosha National Park, with a small number in Khaudam National Park. But some stray into farmlands and cause the same problem as cheetahs. They too are killed in large numbers – about 1,000 were destroyed between 1965 and 1994, according to records kept by the Etosha Ecological Institute.

In February 1996, farmers were able to explain their problems to wildlife specialists, including biologists, managers and veterinarians, at a Population and Habitat Viability Assessment workshop organized by the Namibian Ministry of Environment and Tourism and the IUCN Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG). The farmers said they did not want cheetahs to be exterminated, but costly losses of livestock, and also valuable wildlife on game farms, had to be reduced by new management techniques. Ways were needed to make cheetahs a valuable asset for farmers to compensate for economic losses. Research was required on the farmlands to help farmers and conservationists, who needed to be brought together to discuss disagreements.

With regard to lions, the farmers main desire was that they should be kept out of the farmlands. They complained that the wildlife authorities were failing to maintain game fences, which were broken by erosion and warthogs. But they recognized that lack of government funding and staff shortages handicapped the authorities.

The conservationists felt that inadequate range, and fragmented populations, as well as conflict between humans and predators, were major problems, along with insufficient funding for conservation of lions and cheetahs. Predators were being killed, and habitat lost, while there was no incentive to conserve. Climatic fluctuations (lengthy droughts interspersed with rainy periods) affected cheetah and lion populations, and there were problems of disease and genetic dangers.

The scientists admitted that there were gaps in their knowledge of lion and cheetah survival and conservation, as well as of appropriate sustainable land-use systems to benefit wildlife and private landowners. In particular, they expressed concern about the long-term survival of the limited lion population.

Officials said the impact of removals on lion and cheetah populations was a critical problem. There were also incompatible land-use objectives within the ranges of the big predators. Financial and human resources to maintain effective communications with other stake-holders were lacking.

The workshop divided into specialist groups to consider the problems and to draft proposed solutions which would maintain viable populations of lions and cheetahs. The proposals, which will be presented to the Namibian government, stress the importance of better communication and collaboration between all concerned with the country's lions and cheetahs; increased efforts to limit livestock losses through better management of both livestock and predators; and scientific research to provide improved data for decision making.

Veterinarians reviewed a range of diseases, including rabies, canine distemper and anthrax, which have struck, or could affect, the lion and cheetah populations and urged research and monitoring, along with training of Namibians. They noted that the Etosha lions appeared to be free from Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV), which is widespread among lions elsewhere. They urged further tests to confirm whether the virus is indeed absent. At the same time it was pointed out that, if the lions had evolved without the virus, they could be vulnerable if it arrived.

Geneticists called for assessment of the genetic diversity of Namibia's lions and cheetahs. In particular, they pointed to the possible consequences of small founder populations of lions on game farms/reserves. It was proposed that a Genome Resource Bank for the lions and cheetahs be established. This would allow for germ plasm from wild stocks to be introduced into captive populations without removing animals from the wild, as well as for use to reinforce diversity in wild populations by capture and artificial insemination of wild females.

Management plans for captive populations of lions and cheetahs in Namibia were recommended by captive breeding specialists. They proposed the establishment of an FIV-free captive lion population, which would require a breeding group of 25-30 animals.