

Cheetahs Translocated in Zimbabwe

The Zambezi Society, a Zimbabwe non-governmental organization, has translocated 14 cheetahs from farmland in the lowveld to Matusadonha National Park on the southern shore of Lake Kariba.

A report in Zimbabwe Wildlife (January-March 1997) quotes the Chairman of the Society, Dick Pitman, saying: "The project has been experimental. The ultimate objective is to create a 'founder population' of cheetah in an area where previously the species was rarely encountered."

The magazine said there were about 1,000 cheetah in Zimbabwe and they seemed to be on the increase. However, they were regarded as problem animals because they attacked domestic stock.

A farmer, James Chauke of Malipati village in Chiredzi District, was quoted as saying: "When it comes to choosing between livelihood and wildlife, how many will opt for the latter?" He said 10 cattle of his village had been killed by cheetahs from Gonarezhou National Park. Instead of reporting the cheetahs to government officials, farmers were poisoning them.

In 1995, the Zambezi Society, in collaboration with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management supported

a seven-month US\$15,000 cheetah research project. Cheetahs were captured during wildlife management operations and transported, first by truck and boat, and later by air.

Matusadonha was chosen for the release site because it contained a good number of impala *Aepyceros melampus*, one of the cheetah's preferred prey species.

Pitman said the cheetahs were held for six weeks in a fenced boma on Fothergill island in Lake Kariba before release in Matusadonha. Seven were fitted with radio collars to permit aerial tracking. The cheetahs established home ranges and had produced cubs.

Because of the presence of lions, which kill cheetah cubs, the success of the project depends on cub survival rates. Conservationists have recommended that no further cheetahs be introduced into the park until a full analysis of the data, especially home ranges, had been carried out. Extension work was also needed to increase awareness of cheetah in nearby Omay communal lands because cheetah have strayed there and are a threat to livestock.

(Condensed from Zimbabwe Wildlife, January-March 1997)