



Cheetahs

by Luke Hunter
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The cheetah is one of the world's favourite cats. It is beautiful, graceful, and it tames easily. For centuries, it has been a pet and a hunting companion. Rough estimates have put the number surviving in the wild at 9,000-12,000, almost all of them in southern and eastern Africa. But only tiny sub-populations exist in parts of western and North Africa and in Iran and, probably, Pakistan. India's last known cheetahs were shot by a Maharajah in 1947.

Luke Hunter, from Australia, with no native wild cats, moved to South Africa for his doctoral studies on reintroduction of cheetahs and lions into game reserves. This book has been born of many years of close contact with, and study of cheetahs.

The book opens with a gripping account of a mother cheetah suddenly running down and killing a small antelope, which had been disturbed by her frolicking cubs – “Ten seconds after the chase has begun, there is nothing to see except for a 300-metre-long curtain of dust hanging in the air.”

Hunter then goes on to explain the evolution of this fastest of land mammals, which zoologists once described as *Cynailurus* or “dog cat” because of its canid-like frame and coursing abilities. Past taxonomies have usually put the cheetah in a class somewhat outside other cats, but recent molecular research has shown that it evolved near centre in the cat family.

Socially it has unique behaviour, with brothers, and occasionally non-relatives, joining in life-long coalitions, hunting and seeking mates together. They are, with occasional exceptions, territorial. But the basically-solitary females do not maintain territories like other cats, associate with males only for mating, and have company only when with cubs. Their ranges may overlap those of other females, but there is no conflict between the residents.

Hunter describes the rough courtship, during which males seem to attack females, but, he says, there are seldom injuries and the

attacks may be ritual to stimulate the female's receptivity.

Another peculiarity is that male cheetahs do not kill cub sired by others, as do lions and some other species, including langur monkeys. In fact, cheetah cubs are more liable to be killed by lions, which appear to deliberately hunt them.

Hunter discusses the finding by molecular biologist, Stephen O'Brien, that sub-Saharan cheetahs are genetically very alike. This was interpreted as indicating that the cheetah had gone through a population bottleneck so that the present population is descended from a very small number of inbreeding founders. The results of the studies led to concerns that the cheetah could be devastated by disease.

There have been serious difficulties in captive breeding cheetahs, but Hunter comments: “Almost two decades after the warnings of the geneticists, many of the dire scenarios they predicted have never been realised in the wild. For example, disease incidents are actually very infrequent in cheetah populations... Encouraging signs are also emerging to suggest that inbreeding is not compromising cheetah reproduction... All of this suggests that if low genetic diversity is the cheetah's only problem, wild populations are overcoming it and it was never behind the reproductive puzzle of captive cheetahs in the first place.”

Nevertheless, Hunter describes the vulnerability of the cheetah arising from its physiognomy which means that it is not a fighter and does not stand a chance against dominant carnivores, if surprised. It leads to the suggestion that cheetahs, when tolerated by livestock owners, such as the Masai, may be safer outside protected areas, where lions and hyaenas attack them.

The most severe threat to cheetahs today? People! Their agricultural practices destroy cheetah habitat and eliminate natural prey. Furthermore, farmers relentlessly shoot and trap cheetahs, which they see as a threat to their livestock. Hunter declares that, during the 1980s, no less than 10,000 cheetahs were killed or removed in Namibia alone, most on rangelands. However, Namibia, with the largest surviving cheetah population, is the scene of intensive efforts in which conservationists, farmers and hunters are collaborating to save the cheetah.

Hunter's book is a valuable account of the cheetah, which will, hopefully, increase understanding of the peril faced by this popular cat, and arouse further support for its conservation.

Produced in landscape format, the book contains spectacular photos of cheetahs in the wild, hunting, resting, with cubs, and even one viewing another it had killed.

Peter Jackson