

CHEETAH PROGRESS REPORT - JULY 2003

RADIO-COLLARED CHEETAH RELEASED IN HWANGE NATIONAL PARK

During 2001 and 2002 the Chipangali Wildlife Trust Research Unit helped capture 18 cheetah from farms and ranch lands in Matabeleland, Western Zimbabwe. Many of the animals were found killing livestock such as calves, domestic ostriches, sheep and goats.

Part of the practical wildlife work that our unit is involved in includes assisting the National Parks & Wildlife Authority with the capture and translocation of problem leopards and cheetah. A research permit has been issued to Chipangali to undertake this work. In addition to cheetah and leopard other species of wildlife caught in wire snares which have been set by poachers have also been rescued.

Most of the problem cheetah and leopard rescued have been held at Chipangali for some time before being released back into the wild. This release only takes place once we have obtained sufficient funding for these very expensive operations and after a suitable release location has been found.

Over the last 12 months or more we have released six cheetah onto a game ranch in the Limpopo Valley, two into the Matobo National Park and four into the Hwange National Park.

THIS BRIEF REPORT GIVES DETAILS OF THE FOUR CHEETAH RELEASED INTO THE HWANGE NATIONAL PARK – A REAL SUCCESS STORY :

After the four cheetah were held at Chipangali for some eight months we managed to get sufficient funding from various Zoos in the United States to undertake the operation.

A holding enclosure built of diamond mesh fencing and gum poles was erected at Giraffe Springs some 50km west of Main Camp in the Hwange National Park. Chipangali Wildlife Orphanage provided the 7-ton truck which was used to transport the poles, wire, staff and cheetah to Hwange, a distance of over 350km from Chipangali.

After building the enclosure the cheetah were released into it and held there for 10 days. Two of the four males were fitted with radio-collars which were donated by the Oregon Zoo Foundation. Over the period of 10 days the cheetah were fed on 5 occasions on impala carcasses provided by the National Parks & Wildlife Authority.

Even though the cheetah had been in captivity at Chipangali for 8 months they were still wild and had not in any way been habituated to humans. We deliberately kept the animals as wild as possible.

On 31st October 2002 we removed the wire enclosures and set the cheetah free.

Our main concern about releasing the cheetah into Hwange was the fact that very large populations of spotted hyaena (about 1000 animals) and lion (about 500 animals) existed in the

Park and we were worried that as the cheetah had come from an area of farm land where no lions or spotted hyaena occurred they may not survive in Hwange.

With a great deal of anxiety the cheetah were set free and all we could do was to wait and see how they fared in such a hostile environment.

1.

For a week we monitored the movements of the radio-collared animals. The group of four animals split: One group of three stayed together (one had a radio-collar) and a single male, also fitted with a collar, went off by himself. All four animals remained in the Giraffe Springs area for over a week and then I had to return to Bulawayo.

In November 2002 I visited Hwange again to try and locate the cheetah and found that the group of three had moved some 15km east towards Main Camp, while the single male had remained close to Giraffe Springs.

By January 2003 the single male was still found near Giraffe Springs while the group of three had moved another 10km east and close to the line of seasonal pans near the Tshebema road. By the end of January 2003 it was obvious that the cheetah were killing for themselves as they would not have survived without food and up until then they had also avoided lions and spotted hyaenas.

By March 2003 the group of three were located near Tshebe Tshebe Pan and were actually seen by visitors on two occasions. I also radio-tracked them to that area. Unfortunately the single male which remained in the Giraffe Springs area could not be found and even though we searched the entire area there was no sign of him. We feared the worst.

By May 2003 the group of three had moved into the area close to Nyamandhlovu Pan and were seen on numerous occasions by visitors and research staff working in the Park. On one occasion they were seen hunting impala and on another occasion seen feeding on a young kudu.

When I visited Main Camp in July 2003 the group of three were still found in the area. In addition to finding them at least twice every day we also actually saw them on five occasions. They were wild but in superb condition. The radio collar was working perfectly well and we could pick up the signal from over 3km away. The group were located at the following Pans: Nyamandhlovu, Dom, Balla Balla, Puffadder and Livingi, all in the Main Camp area. They were obviously moving about quite a lot in the comparatively open grassy area with clumps of Acacia and Combretum vegetation.

By July the single radio-collared male which stayed in the Giraffe Springs area for some months had moved and was seen together with two naturally wild cheetah at Shumba Pan. This was wonderful news and indicated that the animal had moved about 30km west of Giraffe Springs to Shumba Pan.

On a previous visit to Hwange I had seen two wild cheetah on the plains at Shumba so there is a possibility that our radio-collared male had joined up with the two wild animals.

Therefore 8 months after being released back into the wild it is most encouraging to find that all four of the cheetah had survived. This is most exciting and the fact that they have avoided the two

super-predators (lions and hyenas) for 8 months is a most encouraging sign. In addition they are obviously killing for themselves as they would not have lasted eight months without food.

As far as the distances travelled are concerned, the single male has moved 30km from where it was released west to Shumba Pan while the group of three had moved 50km east to the Nyamandhlovu area.

With this unbelievable success we can now safely say that even though the wild-caught problem cheetah were held in captivity for over eight months and fed to a large extent on donkey and horse meat they had not lost their ability to hunt for themselves.

2.

As a result of this successful pilot project in Hwange additional cheetah will be released into Hwange National Park as soon as additional funds can be obtained.

The success of this operation was due to the following people and organisations that provided equipment, material and funds :

Oklahoma Zoo (USA)		
Specialist Co-ordinator of North American Cheetah Species Survival Plan	-	Jack Grisham
Columbus Zoo (USA)	-	Dusty Lombardi
Oregon Zoo Conservation Foundation (USA)	-	Mr. Chris Pfefferkorn
Detroit Zoological Park	-	Dr. Ron Kagan
Nottingham Estate (Zimbabwe)	-	Ken and Priscilla Eva
National Parks and Wildlife Authority	-	(Warden, Main Camp –Elias Mafu)
Giraffe Springs (Wilderness Safaris)	-	Ron Goatley, Dave Christensen
Chipangali Wildlife Trust	-	Louise Gower, Kevin & Nicky Wilson, Paddy Wilson
SPCA	-	Mrs Meryl Harrison

FOOTNOTE: 28th July 2003. A visitor called at the Chipangali town offices over the weekend to let us know that his party had sighted at Hwange National Park, three cheetah, one of which was radio-collared, chasing a kudu on the Shumba plain, on Tuesday afternoon (22nd July 2003).

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