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Abstract: As cheetahs have CITES Appendix II status in Zimbabwe, 50 animals per year are allocated for sport hunting. However, several ranchers still have surplus animals, many of which are beginning to kill livestock, and they have expressed a desire to see these animals relocated within the Parks and Wildlife Estate. In 1992, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management proposed the relocation of a breeding population of cheetahs from these farming areas to a suitable area in the Zambezi Valley in the north of Zimbabwe.

Re-introduction of Cheetah in Matusadona, Zimbabwe

by M.W. Atkinson and P. Wood*

Cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) are distributed throughout Zimbabwe, both on Parks and Wild Life Estate (PWLE) land and on commercial farmland. These populations tend to be small and widely dispersed. However, the last decade has seen significant increases in numbers of cheetah in certain commercial farming areas, particularly the south and south-east lowveld areas. The country's total population is now estimated to be at least 1,300.

As cheetah have CITES Appendix II status in Zimbabwe, 50 animals per year are allocated for sport hunting. However, several ranchers still have surplus animals, many of which are beginning to kill livestock, and they have expressed a desire to see these animals relocated within the Parks and Wildlife Estate. In 1992, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management proposed the relocation of a breeding population of cheetah from these farming areas to a suitable area in the Zambezi Valley in the north of Zimbabwe.

Matusadona National Park is situated on the southern shoreline of Lake Kariba and provides suitable habitat for cheetah. The lake was last at full supply level in 1981 and the water level has steadily declined over the years since then, fluctuating from year to year and establishing a new, radically altered ecosystem. The north-east of the park is characterised by mixed woodland and mopane scrub bordered by vast expanses of shoreline grassland which have become populated by large herds of impala and buffalo.

In May 1993, a boma was established to allow the cheetah to become acclimatised to the new area and to allow a period of veterinary observation prior to their release. The boma consists of a circular (200m circumference) fenced area (4m high) with both grassland and mopane scrub areas accessible to all animals inside. A circular water trough has been constructed under shade and the entire perimeter is surrounded by three-strand electric fencing. An observation platform has been established outside the boma, adjacent to the water trough.

In May 1993, a group of four cheetah was successfully maintained in the boma and later released. One of these animals (adult male) was fitted with a radio-telemetry collar allowing post-release monitoring. Another 11 animals have been subsequently held in the boma and released (in batches of three or four), six of which are currently radio-collared.

The cheetah were captured using helicopter and ground teams and were either transported by road in crates or by light aircraft to Matusadona. The designated founder population is 20 animals and all releases will be the result of wild-to-wild translocation.

All animals have spent introductory periods of six to eight weeks in the boma prior to release. Feeding regimes have been based on expected feeding preferences in the wild. All groups

have been offered freshly killed impala every two to three days and it has been noticed that after release, impala constitute the preferred prey species. The size of the boma appears adequate for groups of three to four individuals and no stereotype behaviour associated with boredom has been noticed. Normal diurnal activity patterns appear to have been maintained although a lack of hunting exercise has been a concern with animals gaining body fat during the boma period. It has been noticed, however, that after release normal activity is resumed. Lion activity around the boma has been a problem and several attempts by lions to gain access have been witnessed. None has been successful, but the importance of lion-proof fencing has been highlighted.

The re-introduction project has been a valuable learning experience. It has allowed methods of cheetah capture to be designed and refined. It has allowed the establishment of veterinary health protocols, including general cheetah management, feeding regimes and housing requirements. It has allowed experience to be gained in radio-telemetric device fitting and monitoring and has provided protocols for boma management and release.

Radio telemetry has provided an extremely important management option. The radio collars are tolerated well by the animals and regular tracking from both the air and the ground has provided much information on movement and social habits of individual cheetah. This means of monitoring will also be instrumental in assessing the success of the programme.

To date, one adult male cheetah has been illegally hunted in an adjacent communal farming area. This was discovered by tracking the collar to a hut where the hunter had hidden both the collar and the skin of the cheetah. One uncollared female is reported to have had cubs shortly after release from the boma: however, their status at present is unknown.

The success of this programme can only be assessed in time, once the founder population has been truly established. However, the fact that the animals translocated so far are surviving in the face of considerable predator competition and are interacting socially is an encouraging indicator of the programme's potential. This short-term success also indicated the need for a national cheetah strategy to further expand the cheetah's range and to relieve problems associated with population overgrowth in certain areas. The cheetah programme continues in 1995 with a further seven animals to be translocated.

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