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Abstract: The cheetah is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding attractions for tourists visiting the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. Of all the predator cats, however, the cheetah is most vulnerable to tourism. It is also the most endangered. Cheetah have diurnal hunting habits. They are shy, but often occur in open habitats where they are easily found. These factors render them susceptible to the pressures of tourism. Excessive tourists numbers and poor wildlife observation practices can affect their hunting success, reproductive success, and cub mortality. However, many of the negative effects of tourism on wildlife, particularly cheetahs, can be avoided provided tourists and their guides behave responsibly towards these elegant cats. As cheetahs lose habitat and become increasingly confined to protected areas, responsible practices by tourists and guides will be crucial to their continued survival and success. This proposal seeks support in the way of air travel for a campaign aimed at heightening the awareness of tour drivers and tourists as to the plight of the cheetah within the Serengeti Ecosystem. Tour guides will be provided with intensive information and education sessions to enable them to understand the impact their wildlife viewing practices have on cheetahs. Ways of minimizing these impacts will be stressed, and information provided to give guides/drivers more opportunities to maximize the cheetah watching opportunities with their clients. Tourists will be targeted simultaneously with the sale of cheetah watch kits. Each kit will provide visitors with up to date, accurate information on the natural history of cheetahs, along with details of protocol to follow when observing cheetah. Proceeds from the sale of these kits will finance their re-supply and on-going education activities in the Serengeti.

THE SERENGETI CHEETAH PROJECT

CHEETAHS AND TOURISM

by

Dr S. Durant

Director
Serengeti Cheetah Project
SWRI
Box 3134
Arusha
Tanzania

&

Institute of Zoology
Zoological Society of London
Regent's Park
London
NW1 4RY

Summary

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Cheetah have diurnal hunting habits. They are shy, but often occur in open habitats where they are easily found. These factors render them susceptible to the pressures of tourism. Excessive tourists numbers and poor wildlife observation practices can affect their hunting success, reproductive success, and cub mortality.

However, many of the negative effects of tourism on wildlife, particularly cheetahs, can be avoided provided tourists and their guides behave responsibly towards these elegant cats. As cheetahs lose habitat and become increasingly confined to protected areas, responsible practices by tourists and guides will be crucial to their continued survival and success.

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Background

Cheetahs, already endangered, continue to decline throughout their range as their habitat is lost to cultivation. In the near future, protected areas may provide the only realistic hope for the long term survival of this species. However, because cheetahs naturally occur at low densities, even here they are threatened. Tourism, whilst crucial for generating income for many poor countries, can badly affect cheetahs. Cheetahs on the Serengeti plains have been studied and individually recognised for over 20 years, this study is now expanding to encompass woodland cheetahs. During the course of this study it is becoming increasingly apparent that tourism is changing cheetah behaviour and endangering these amazing cats.

Cheetahs are a major attraction in many parks of East Africa. With 42 000 visitors to the Serengeti annually, tourism is of sufficient scale to affect significantly the local environment as well as the behaviour of individual animals. While tourism is important in generating for Tanzania, it is crucial that it is not allowed to endanger the very animals which make these protected areas and countries a destination for visitors. The Serengeti Ecosystem supports one of the largest and most dense populations of cheetah in East Africa. nonetheless, this population is still small and vulnerable to harassment. There only some 300 individuals in total, compared to 3000 lions in the same area.

A number of features of cheetah behaviour and ecology render them particularly vulnerable to being adversely affected by tourism. Cheetahs in the ecosystem are diurnal - they share a day-time schedule with visitors. They are also numerous in open habitats where they can be easily found. Many cheetahs tend to be shy and when found, are easily disturbed.

The cheetahs on the Serengeti plains have been the subject of an intensive long-term study. This study has gathered 20 years of data on known individuals. As a result, much is known about the cheetah's ecology and behaviour. Non-intrusive observation techniques have been developed. These form the basis for this proposal.

The Problems

Tourism has a direct impact on cheetahs.

1. Hunting success

A hunting cheetah often will not initiate a hunt if it feels it might lose any kill it makes. Persistent, and in many cases, excessively close pursuit by visitors vehicles can keep a cheetah from a successful hunt for an entire day. For a female with cubs, this could have disastrous consequences. Even where a cheetah is tame, the presence of visitors close to the animal may scare prey species, thereby preventing prey from wandering close to a hidden cheetah.

2. Abandonment of caught prey

If a cheetah is frightened off a kill, it will not return. An insensitive approach by tourists to a cheetah on a kill means the cheetah loses that meal entirely.

3. Cub mortality

Cheetah mothers have an enormous task in raising a litter of cheetah cubs. Harassment or disturbance of hunting activities can prevent them from being able to meet the nutritional demands of their offspring. The cubs are kept hidden in the lair during their first two months - harassment of a mother, apparently on her own, will have severe effects on hunting ability and thus her milk production and the cubs survival.

Visitors may also unwittingly influence cub survival by separating a mother from her cubs. Failure to assess the situation before approaching a cheetah can mean that a mother and her cubs are separated by a vehicle, frightening both. Cheetah contact calls do not carry over long distance, and if the mother is unable to relocate her cubs they will die.

4. Adolescent and adult mortality

Insensitive visitors can also indirectly influence the mortality of fully grown cheetahs. This is particularly true of adolescent cheetahs which are inept hunters. These cheetahs may starve if their hunting success is further reduced. Additionally, tourists may pursue a fleeing cheetah, inadvertently causing them to escape into the path of lions and hyenas which may kill the exhausted animal, as happened at least once in the Maasai Mara.

5. Mating success

On the Serengeti plains, male cheetahs are generally much more shy than females. Tourist vehicles have been seen to scare away the male in a consorting pair of cheetahs.

6. Habituation to humans

Habituation of cheetahs to humans could place the animal in jeopardy. “Tame” cheetahs which leave the parks and reserves could be placed at risk by surrounding human populations. Collection of apparently lost cubs has disastrous results for a cheetah population already endangered.

Practical Remedies.

Although cheetahs face a large number of problems as a direct consequence of tourism, there are several solutions which can minimise the impact of visitors on cheetahs. Researchers have identified techniques for cheetah observation which are applicable to guides and visitors. The following recommendations would be expanded upon as part of an education and information sharing campaign:

Cheetahs should never be approached directly. Vehicles should instead approach extremely slowly at an angle or in a zig-zag fashion.

Vehicles should stop outside 200m and the guides should first observe the animals through binoculars to assess group composition and the behaviour before approaching closer.

Guides should learn to tell if a cheetah is likely to hunt. This can be assessed reliably by the cheetah’s belly size. Caution should be exercised in approaching a cheetah which is hungry, hunting or with prey.

A vehicle should not be moved if a cheetah is stalking. It should not follow a moving cheetah, but should wait until the animal has settled before approaching. If a cheetah has a kill it should be approached with extreme caution.

Observation of habituated cheetah is best done when observers have a roof hatch over their head. This helps to obscure the visitor and makes it difficult for the cheetah to distinguish people as separate from the vehicle. Easily read cheetah signals indicate a cheetahs’ mood and tolerance for being approached. Drivers can readily learn these signals and approach accordingly. Cheetah approach procedures, recommended distances for observation, and how to make the most of cheetah watching is a necessary part of instruction and education of visitors and guides.

If visitors and guides obey this *cheetah watch code* they should be able to observe the animals natural behavior, and are far more likely to see them hunt. Both cheetahs and visitors will benefit.

Proposal

Most visitors to the Serengeti Ecosystem are driven and guided by tour operation personnel. Visitors and tour driver/guides would be the focus, therefore, of an intensive campaign of information, education and marketing. The purpose of this campaign would be to promote safer, more considerate, and more rewarding cheetah watching.

The elements of the campaign are:

1. Talks

A series of focused talks to tour company driver/ guides will be given. The talks will outline basic features of cheetah behavior and ecology to enable the guides to provide accurate information to their clients. Furthermore, the talks will outline the protocol to observe when approaching cheetahs at all times of the day.

2. Cheetah Watch Kits

A package of information and promotional materials will be developed and sold to tourists visiting the ecosystem. An important component of this kit will be a booklet outlining the same information provided to driver/guides. In addition, safe cheetah watching will be popularised by including stickers and a T-shirt. All will promote the buyer as a safe cheetah watcher. Additional stickers and booklets will be marketed in addition to these kits.

Through this campaign we expect to reduce cheetah harassment by:

Creating a better informed and more aware cadre of tour guides and visitors.

Using peer pressure between both visitors and guides to reduce cheetah harassment

Generating revenue from the promotional materials (kits) which will enable these to be continually reproduced. Profits accruing from sales will support further cheetah research and education.