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Abstract: 5000 to 12000 cheetahs are estimated to live in Africa south of the Sahara, and 200 in Iran and possibly in northwest Afghanistan. The loss of habitat is assessed as the most serious threat for this species.
Encyclopedia of Endangered Species

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Cheetah

Acinonyx jubatus

**Classification and Biology**

Cheetahs are considered the world's fastest land mammals, capable of reaching speeds of 60-75 mph (96-120 km/h). The cheetah's name is derivates from the word *chita*, which means “spotted one.” This species measures 4.5-5.5 ft (1.4-1.5 m) long, weighs 100-150 lb (45-66 kg), and its tail is 24-32 in (61-81 cm). Their coat is covered with a uniquely blotched coat; these markings help in camouflage. Cheetahs are able to chase but not with the same facility as semicats. They can, however, chase their prey at speeds of 40-50 mph for short sprints. The cheetah has physical traits similar to dogs and, like them, pursues prey rather than ambushes. It thrives on the abundance of prey, with antelope, wildebeest, and gazelles being a common diet. Cheetahs are essential to the health of the ecosystem, keeping herds of antelope in check. They can reach speeds of 70-75 mph (110-120 km/h) while chasing. Females are capable of giving birth at any time of the year, but most births occur during the rainy season. Each litter usually consists of 1 to 3 cubs. The cubs are weaned at 8 weeks and can run by 8 months.
hyenas, jackals, and eagles. The mother brings small, live prey to the cubs to help them develop hunting skills.

**Habitat and Current Distribution**

The cheetah is now restricted to Africa south of the Sahara. Estimates of total population range from 5,000 to 12,000. An additional population estimated at 200 animals occurs in Iran and possibly in northwest Afghanistan.

Preferred habitat is savanna and arid, open grasslands for hunting prey. It also utilizes bushland as cover for stalking prey, for hiding from predators, and for shade in the heat of the afternoon.

**History and Conservation Measures**

The cheetah once ranged over much of Africa, Arabia, the Middle East, and northern India. Population was estimated at 28,000 in the mid-1950s and at 14,000 in the early 1970s. Decline in distribution and population is attributed to a number of factors, including hunting and habitat disruption. Cheetahs are legally protected in most countries, but they are sometimes killed by farmers protecting their domestic animals. They are also hunted for their spotted pelt, although not as often as other cats.

The loss of habitat is the most serious threat to this species. As suitable habitat decreases, so does available prey for cheetahs and for other large carnivores. Other concerns include a cub mortality rate of almost 90 percent and a depleted gene pool that leaves the cheetah vulnerable to genetic defects. The death rate of adult males is also very high as a result of territorial disputes. Despite these obstacles, the cheetah seems to be adapting to its reduced circumstances and resisting extinction.

Captive breeding of this species has not been very successful, with less than 25 percent of captive adults breeding more than once. The American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums is sponsoring research through the Species Survival Plan to investigate the causes of breeding failure.