

## ASPECTS OF THE CHEETAH SITUATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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### INTRODUCTION

One of the stated aims of this symposium is the compilation of a list of southern African endangered species. There is little doubt that Acinonyx jubatus will be one of the contenders for inclusion in this unfortunate company.

How have the cheetahs' fortunes fluctuated in the past, where do they stand at present, and what of the future? Certainly it is not a neglected animal. Recently, Wrogemann (1975) has cited some 90 references, both scientific and popular, dealing specifically with aspects of cheetah biology. Neither are we dealing with a species reduced to a pathetic few dozen or even a hundred surviving specimens. This symposium will certainly produce evidence of species in far worse shape. Why then the concern?

The cheetah and its future has enjoyed so much popularity in print of late that there is little I can contribute to the subject. Indeed, I run the risk of being merely repetitious by adding further comment on the situation. However, in the hope of assisting in the formulation of an objective assessment of the cheetah's position in southern Africa today, I offer the following discussion.

### THE PAST, HISTORICAL AND RECENT

It is not surprising that an animal as spectacular as the cheetah should have enjoyed the attention and admiration of ancient man. We can trace man's impact on the species from the earliest times. Even before the Egyptians revered them as a sacred creature, primitive man was robbing this mild-mannered cat of its kills. From this rather parasitic relationship evolved one less harsh on the individual animal, but nevertheless initiating a trend which could only be detrimental to the species. The cheetah was discovered as a companion and servant of man. Favoured by the aristocracy of long dead civilisations, hundreds of cheetah were removed from the wild for the pleasure of Rajahs and Princes, Khans and Kings. Acinonyx jubatus might have survived ancient man but it is doubtful that it will outlive Homo sapiens.

As a result of these early pressures, the cheetah, which previously ranged as far as Asia, India and the Middle East, has to all intents and purposes disappeared in these regions. The discovery of an extant population in India today would be cause for great delight, as would be sightings in Asia or Arabia.

This shrinkage in range has occurred also in Africa. No longer can Egypt boast populations of an animal which was once the companion of Pharaohs, and there remain probably only relict populations, if any, north of the Sahara. Of the animals remaining in the rest of the continent, Norman Myers, in his IUCN survey, estimates that their numbers have halved within the past 15 years.

The history of cheetah in southern Africa is oddly lacking in detail, and mention of the animal is conspicuously absent from the narratives of the early explorers and hunters. It is difficult to accept that such competent naturalists would have been unfamiliar with the cheetah had these animals occurred in any great number in the sub-continent in past years. One might have expected that the historic accounts of pioneers would have made frequent reference to the cheetahs' spectacular hunting method. Furthermore, the animal plays no great part in the folk tales or folk art of the indigenous peoples of the area.

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Abstract: How have the cheetahs' fortunes fluctuated in the past, where do they stand at present, and what of the future?

There were many uncertainties about the cheetah in the past and it has long been frustrating to reproduce in captivity. Sport hunting and trade in the skins also reduced cheetahs in the past.

In South Africa and Rhodesia the trend is toward cheetah being limited to protected areas only. South West Africa and Botswana are relatively sparsely populated. It should be remembered that political expediency has done the cheetah disservice in the past. The situation regarding cheetah living on farmland will not ease in the future. Intensifying farming methods will be incompatible with the cheetahs' presence. Also exploding human population poses a threat to all wildlife. It will be for future generations to assess what stage the battle for the cheetah was finally lost.



In the absence of such observations one is forced to speculate that the species was never really common.

The subject of much debate and confusion, the cheetah has long held the interest of the scientific community. Its un-catlike build and non-retractile claws prompted theories of its being a cat/dog intermediate. There still exists much argument as to the maximum speed attainable by this running predator, and similar discussion was prompted by the exotically marked mutant, the King Cheetah. The last 10 years, however, have seen a dramatic increase in our knowledge of the species. Several field studies have been completed, including those made by such eminent scientists as Hans Kruuk and George Schaller.

The reluctance of the species to reproduce in captivity has long frustrated those investigating this aspect of cheetah biology. Only in 1956 was the first litter born in captivity, and this event could claim only partial success as the cubs did not survive. Litters born in 1960 and 1966 were the first to attain adulthood. It was only in 1973 that the first south African institution recorded success.

This very problem of captive reproduction was one of the factors contributing to cheetah exploitation during the more recent past. Zoological gardens and similar bodies could only replace exhibition and experimental animals with specimens caught in the wild, and while this aspect possibly never in itself posed a very serious threat, it nevertheless contributed to the overall drain on the species.

Strangely enough sport hunting seems to have been a minor culprit amongst the forces responsible for the decimation of cheetah populations. The glory associated with the killing of a cheetah was probably somewhat tarnished by the fact that the animal is fairly easily cudgelled to death, and may even be captured live by hand. Many hunters do not shoot cheetah for personal reasons and hunting organisations have in the past imposed bans on their members hunting this species.

The trade in the skins of the spotted cats is an entirely different matter with horrific figures such as 1 000 cheetah and leopard skins being processed in Johannesburg every three months, there can be little doubt that the fur trade has, and still does offer a very serious threat to the continued existence of the species. Many attempts have been made to stem such irresponsible activity. Appeals to both the suppliers and purchasers of skins and derived products have had little lasting effect. Many countries have introduced legislation banning the import of the skins of the spotted cats, and the exporting countries have in turn restricted the official outflow. But for these approaches to be successful the co-operation of all countries and organisations is needed. The cheetah is merely a pawn in the remunerative business of the skin trade.

As one examines the success, or rather lack of, of the cheetah in withstanding the pressures placed upon it by mankind, it is extremely difficult to be optimistic regarding the species' future. It is said that history repeats itself, and if the past history of Acinonyx jubatus is an indication of what lies ahead, we could well be witnesses of the tragic decline of a condemned animal.

### THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

If any one point has emerged from the preceding paragraphs it is that history has dealt harshly with the cheetah. The condemnation of past practices while implicit, will serve little purpose at this Symposium, and it would be far more profitable to assess the position of cheetah conservation as of July 1976, and possible future trends.

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The species still occurs through parts of the area south of the Zambesi, either within places offering protection or in areas offering none, where, by good luck and elusiveness, it has managed to survive. The cheetah has nevertheless disappeared from large areas of its former range, and there is little or no likelihood of it ever returning to these. It is encouraging to know that animals still occur outside the boundaries of protected areas, but to rely on such a population as part of a conservation programme would be to entertain a false sense of security. There can be no certainty attached to such a situation. For this reason population estimates do not always reflect a true picture.

Myers cites the following figures for the countries of southern Africa. South Africa : 700 with a range between 600 and 800 and the possibility of a decline to less than 500 within 5 years. South West Africa: A population of some 1 500 with a range of 1 000 to 3 000. By 1980 1 000 or fewer could remain. Botswana: 2 000 and a range of 1 000 to 3 000. 1980 will have seen some decline in this population. Rhodesia: 400 with a range from 250 to 500. Future pressures may reduce this total to only 200 by the end of this decade.

The censusing of cheetah remains a very difficult task, and the author of the quoted figures will no doubt agree that some might be liable to correction in the light of future evidence. Their great merit lies in the fact that we today have a starting point and stimulus to either agree with or correct these estimates.

In both South Africa and Rhodesia the trend is toward cheetah being limited to protected areas only. (South West Africa and Botswana on the other hand are relatively sparsely populated and together form a last stronghold for the cheetah of the southern continent).

In both these areas the cheetah enjoys legal protection, as is the situation in Rhodesia and parts of South Africa. While the position is at present secure, it is not impossible that influences other than nature conservation might exert pressure for changes, and it should be remembered that political expediency has done the cheetah disservice in the past.

Regulations already promulgated have their loopholes. It is an unfortunate fact that cheetah do kill livestock, and the interests of the owner must be considered. It is not the fault of the authorities that a loophole exists, for a farmer is entitled to protect his property, in this case stock. The abuse of the law begins when the landowner uses the mere presence of a cheetah on his farm as an excuse to destroy it. It is particularly difficult to enforce such legislation. Suggestions that persons suffering losses due to cheetah predation be compensated are equally open to abuse, and any solution to the problem will not be a simple one.

While the prohibiting of the import of cheetah and similarly spotted cat skins by the United States and other countries is a welcome move, the ban on trade in live animals has had unexpected repercussions in some areas. Farmers who were once prepared to catch a marauding animal alive for later sale are now shooting them out of hand. It is a debatable matter as to whether it is preferable to have a captive but live animal or a dead one.

Neither is the solution the capture of stock-raiding animals and their removal to protected areas. This approach has been tried in the past, but whether such experiments were a success is doubtful. While more research on the matter is needed, it is possible that such a practice might do more harm than good. The introduction of new animals into areas already carrying optimum numbers could be detrimental not only to the introduced cheetah, but also to the resident population. Just such a programme is soon to be initiated in Rhodesia, and the results of this operation are awaited with interest.

The situation regarding cheetah living on farmland will not ease in the future. Farming methods will intensify and become more sophisticated, and thus incompatible with the cheetahs' presence. Today such trends are clearly visible, and only ranching areas and marginal lands still support viable populations in developed countries. Improved farming techniques will see future



encroachment even in these areas. The time might not be too far distant when protected areas offer the only opportunity for observing wild cheetahs.

An exploding human population poses a threat to all wildlife, and eventually, perhaps, even itself. Growth predictions for southern Africa indicate that just such a situation might prevail on the subcontinent. With an unprecedented increase in food demand existing wildlife reserves may well be forced to justify their existence in terms of meat production, at which stage competition from predators might not be tolerated.

This is admittedly an extreme view, but if the above situation ever prevailed not only the cheetah, if indeed the species had managed to survive to this stage, but the other large predators might be seen only in reduced numbers, in zoos.

One of the aims of many zoological gardens is the protection of rare and endangered species, and the assurance of their continued preservation by captive breeding. Many successful conservation programmes have had their beginnings in zoos, and there is little doubt that the increasing success of the many captive breeding efforts will ensure the perpetuation of the species in captivity. A cheetah in his cage is however, a poor second best to one in the wild, and it is doubtful that the re-introduction of captive-bred cheetah to natural areas will ever be a practical proposition.

Much time is needed for the successful re-introduction of even one animal, as was clearly demonstrated by Joy Adamson. The cheetah problem is too pressing to permit exclusive attention to individual animals, and if we are to succeed in our endeavours to protect a species from extinction we must think in terms of a species.

The prestige involved in the breeding of captive cheetah has revealed another problem associated with this aspect of the effort to preserve the species. There is ample evidence to indicate that too often the motives of the persons involved are selfish to the extent of actually inhibiting the efforts of others involved in the end. Such an unfortunate state of affairs is by no means limited to those associated with breeding programmes. The cheetah is the perfect vehicle for personal advancement, whether it be fame or fortune that are desired, and it would not be inopportune for those of us concerned with cheetah conservation to examine our own motives carefully.

And so it seems that even in his attempts to conserve the cheetah man is prepared to place self interest first. The cheetah crisis is synonymous with more general wildlife crisis, and its decline must be seen in the context of a greater decline. It would require a super-optimist to preach hope for the cheetah, and the realist forces me to suggest that we are fighting a rearguard action against impossible odds. It will be for future generations to assess at what stage the battle for the cheetah was finally lost.

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