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Abstract: Namibia, the cheetah's main problem is in direct conflict with man and his livestock. The species generally does not do well in protected areas where there is strong competition with other large predators, such as lions and hyenas. Because of predation pressure in reserves, many cheetahs live in unprotected areas.

Status of the Cheetah in Zimbabwe and Namibia

by Laurie Marker-Kraus and Daniel Kraus

In October 1989, we spent three and a half weeks in southern Africa investigating the status of the cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus*. Our goal was to collect current information on the cheetah and to develop a network of concerned groups and individuals wanting to establish research collaborations and conservation programs to ensure a future for the endangered cheetah.

Cheetah populations throughout Africa have been steadily declining because of loss of habitat, poaching and conflict with ranching. The species generally does not do well in protected areas where there is strong competition with other large predators, such as lions and hyenas. Because of this pressure in reserves, many cheetahs live in unprotected areas. In Zimbabwe and Namibia, the cheetah's main problem is direct conflict with man and his livestock. In Namibia, more than 95% of the cheetah live on private ranchland.

Besides the loss of habitat, there are several other problems that plague the species. The cheetah lacks genetic variation, causing a problem for the entire population, both in the wild and in captivity. The consequences of this loss have been well documented and include reproduction problems, high infant mortality and disease susceptibility from a weakened immune system.

Although the cheetah has been kept in captivity for over 4,000 years, the world-wide captive population is not self-sustaining. The population in captivity is only sustained by import of wild caught animals from Namibia. Therefore, the captive population at this time cannot be considered a backup to the wild population. Because of these problems, we believe that the survival of the species depends on safeguarding the remaining wild populations.

Our three-day stop in Zimbabwe was with Vivian Wilson at his research facility in Bulawayo, the Chipangali Wildlife Orphanage and Research Center. Vivian is a member of the Cat Specialist Group and conducted a survey of cheetah in Zimbabwe in 1986. We were able to read through all the reports from his survey on cheetah. The current population in Zimbabwe is about 400 animals, located in three areas, Hwange National Park, the southern ranching area, and a few around the Harare ranching area.

Vivian has recently built holding facilities for cheetahs and hopes to receive some problem animals from the ranchlands to start a captive breeding project. He stated that there is a serious need for outside interest in the plight of this species in his country. More research on cheetah must be conducted in the parks to determine possibilities of building up numbers by reintroduction. On the ranchlands, in-depth studies are needed concerning the actual losses of livestock due to cheetah and the development of better livestock management practices to reduce losses by all predators.

At the De Wildt Cheetah Breeding and Research Center outside Pretoria, South Africa, we met with the Director, Anne van Dyke, who has promised the records of her facility for inclusion in the International Cheetah Studbook. We are concerned that South Africa has taken the cheetah off its endangered species list when there are only about 500 wild cheetahs in the country.

The reason for the timing of this trip to Namibia in October 1989 was to be there prior to the November 7 independence elections. Full independence is to be granted from South Africa by April 1990, and Namibia will officially be a new independent country with all the inherent problems of any new African nation with a new government and an economic plan to be developed.

Since Namibia has the largest remaining wild population of cheetahs, we wanted to develop a clear picture of the current situation and attitudes toward the cheetah, before the change of government.

We spent 15 non-stop days meeting with everyone who had an interest in, or problem with, cheetahs. Our meetings were arranged mostly by Dieter Morsbach, the Problem Animal and Cheetah Researcher in the SWA/Namibia Department of Nature Conservation. We met with nature conservators, ranchers, veterinarians, game farmers, tour agents, conservationists and private individuals about problems and possible solutions in conserving the cheetah in Namibia. Namibia's seemingly large population of cheetah is now half of what it was 10 years ago. Estimates range between 2,000 to 3,000 animals, according to Morsbach.

After hearing from the ranchers, it is surprising there are any cheetahs left on the ranchlands. The cheetah gets blamed for most livestock losses. The wildlife on these ranchlands has been owned by the ranchers since the early 1960s when the government turned it over to them. They do as they please with all species found on their land. They are only required to get a permit for killing cheetah after having killed or trapped those which, in many cases, they have arbitrarily judged to be livestock killers. Research conducted by Dieter Morsbach on ranchland has shown that only a small percentage of livestock losses were actually the result of cheetah predation. Natural deaths from abortions, illness and broken legs, and attacks by other predators, and even livestock theft, are responsible for a significant percentage of loss.

There seems to be a tendency to blame the cheetah for most of the missing calves. Calves taken by cheetah are usually under eight months old. If management practices that have been used in other places around the world were implemented by more of the ranchers in Namibia, less livestock would be taken by predators.

One of our goals was to bring public awareness to the world-wide plight of the cheetah, especially in the light of the elections in Namibia. We reached a large part of the 1.3 million population with the message of how important their relatively large and healthy population is to the survival of the species as a whole by doing radio, TV and newspaper interviews. We also gave an in-depth lecture at the Annual Veterinarian Congress, where we were able to solicit the interest of Namibia's veterinarians for future collaboration in cheetah research and in helping to educate the ranchers in better herd management practices.

In our discussions with Nature Conservation officials, we were excited to hear that there are some large areas in the country that are possibly suitable for substantial cheetah reintroduction programs. These areas have few or no humans, few large predators and plenty of prey species. Although cheetah relocation and reintroduction have not been very successful in the past, we feel that a well managed, long term, on-site effort would produce better results. We have many ideas on how this could be accomplished. Reintroduction of carnivores in Namibia, though, does require government approval.

In the Etosha National Park, which covers 22,270 km², there are very few cheetahs. The population is estimated at 30 to 50 animals, and the rangers only see about 15 regularly. The lion and hyena populations are not so large as to warrant so few cheetah. The question is: could the low number be due to susceptibility to disease? The cheetah seems to be the only large predator not to have developed immunities to anthrax, and Etosha's wildlife is

rife with this disease. While we were in Namibia, 10 captive wild cheetahs died from anthrax. This supports our concern. We are hoping that the Etosha Research Institute will expand its anthrax study to look into how anthrax relates to the cheetah in the park.

We are very concerned with the situation of the SWA/Namibia Nature Conservation Department. In 1989, as the South Africa administration was preparing to leave, the department's budget was cut by 85%. Little could be accomplished in 1989, as most projects were restricted to the office. Field researchers caught up on writing and made up car-pools for trips in the field. Now that 1990 is here, the new government is preparing a constitution and the big question is whether there will be any funding to keep the

Department going at even the 1989 level. Without South African funding, Namibia becomes a relatively poor desert country, which will require all forms of international aid. Funds are starting to come in to help with the remaining desert rhino and elephants, and we can only hope that many groups will expand their support to other species, as well as the country of Namibia.

Here, at the National Zoo's NOAH Center, we have set up a Namibia Conservation Interest Group and have also established a Save the Cheetah Campaign. Please contact us for more information: Laurie and Daniel Marker-Kraus, NOAHS Center, National Zoological Park, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20008, USA.