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Abstract: In this newspaper article of 1976, the cheetah is described to be in "poor shape" in Africa. Because of its ecological and behavioural characteristics, the cheetah is confined in the main to savanna grassland and only a few parks and reserves contain significant numbers.
For the Leopard’s Lovers, Good News. For the Cheetah’s, Bad.

By Norman Myers

OXFORD, England—The leopard in Africa is alive and moderately well, but the cheetah is in poor shape.

The leopard can exist in every ecological zone of Africa south of the Sahara, from semi-deserts to forests. In savannah grasslands, however, that form a focus for Africa’s livestock industry, the leopard is rapidly being eliminated. Stockmen are growing more inclined than ever to believe a cow or a sheep should end up on somebody’s plate rather than down some predator’s throat.

But even if leopards disappear from most savannah lands, at least 100,000 perhaps many more should survive in forests and woodlands that look likely to remain relatively undisturbed by human activities for some years to come. This is not to suggest that the leopard is a prospering species. Through the attention of poachers and stockmen, it has been all but extirpated from at least half the countries of Africa. In only five countries is most, notably the lowland forest countries including huge Zaire, is the leopard maintaining anything like substantial numbers.

In contrast, the cheetah is confined in the main to savannah grasslands. Only a few parks and reserves contain significant numbers of cheetah, 5,000 at most. Almost certainly, Africa now contains fewer than 20,000 cheetah, possibly fewer than 10,000. Whatever the figure, it is probably only half as many as in 1960, and it will surely be cut in half within another five years unless new conservation measures can be introduced.

Unlike the leopard, which often lives right up against man’s estate if not within it, the cheetah, being among the most timid of Africa’s wild creatures, is always at risk of man’s intrusion in its living space. Further, the cheetah is often robbed of its kills by other carnivores, even until it starves.

Being lightly built, it runs the risk of damage if it tries to fight back.

Whereas a leopard can survive with a paw missing, a slight injury to a cheetah’s lanky limbs can slow its super-swift pursuit of tomorrow’s prey.

Moreover, the cheetah would get along far better if it were not losing 1,000 hides a year to the salons of Paris, Rome and Tokyo.

One possibility for resolving the situation is to enable the international community to express its convictions on behalf of the cheetah. If the cheetah does in fact “belong” to mankind, rather than to just a few nations of emergent Africa, what can everyone do about it?

Well, they can either put up or shut up. Making good the livestock losses in the half-dozen countries with large cheetah populations would cost between a quarter and a half a million dollars in compensation each year. Then the rich-world conservationist may not wish to be hit in his pocketbook as well as his philosophies, but he should make up his mind where his priorities lie: a martini or two more than last year, or survival for the cheetah?

“A specific choice of that sort would be an advance over the present situation, in which people beat their breasts over the cheetah’s plight but find little opportunity to do much about it.”

Norman Myers, a consultant in conservation, recently undertook a two-year survey of the leopard and cheetah throughout Africa south of the Sahara on behalf of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and the World Wildlife Fund.