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Conservation update

FEATURE: CHEETAH - *Acinonyx Jubatus*

The lion is said to be majestic, the leopard ferocious and shrewd. But elegant and graceful best describes the cheetah. The cheetah is smaller than the other two cats, but by far the fastest. At speeds of 110 kilometres an hour, it can run faster than all other animals.

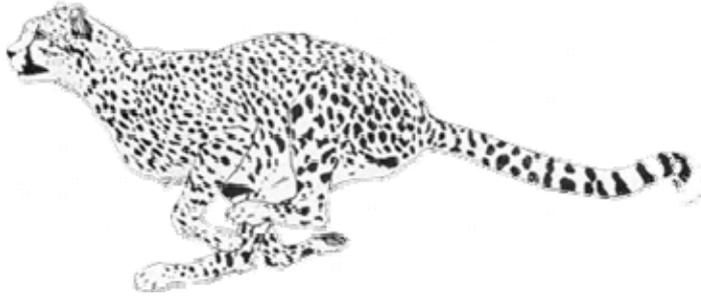
Unlike other cats, the cheetah has a leaner body, longer legs, and has been referred to as the "greyhound" of the cats. The cheetah's flexible spine, oversized liver, enlarged heart, wide nostrils, increased lung capacity, and thin muscular body make this cat the swiftest hunter in Africa. However, it is not an aggressive animal, using flight versus fight. With its weak jaws and small teeth – the price it paid for speed – it cannot fight larger predators to protect its kills or young.

Once a common animal found on four continents, the cheetah is now an Endangered Species. Loss of habitat, poaching, competition with large predators and ranchers, as well as its own loss of genetic variation, is killing off the remaining cheetahs. The cheetah needs a large expanse of land to survive, but with the expanding of the human race this area is becoming smaller and smaller. Unfortunately, captive breeding efforts have not proven meaningful to the cheetah's hopes of survival.

OBSERVE THE WILDLIFE CODE AND DO YOUR PART TOWARDS HELPING US CONSERVE WILDLIFE...

- Respect the privacy of animals – minimum viewing distance is 20 metres.
- Remember that animals are wild and can be dangerous.
- Do not disturb the animals with sudden movements or loud noises.
- It is an offence to feed wild animals.
- Stay in your vehicle except at designated places.
- Respect the speed limit of 40 kilometres per hour in parks.
- Never drive off road as it degrades habitat.
- Do not leave litter or discard lighted cigarettes.
- Respect the culture of the people – never take photographs of local people without their permission.
- It is illegal to collect any living or dead item from a protected area.

Cheetah Facts



CHEETAH – *Acinonyx jubatus*

STATUS: Endangered

DESCRIPTION: The fastest land animal in the world, the cheetah is a marvel of evolution. Capable of running up to 110 kilometres per hour, the cheetah's slender, long-legged body is built for speed. Its spotted coat, small head and ears, and distinctive "tear stripes" from the corner of the eyes down the sides of the nose make the cheetah highly recognizable among the large cats of Africa.

SIZE: The cheetah is smaller than other big cats. Adult body length 112-135 cm; Tail length 66-84 cm; Shoulder height 73+ cm; Weight 34-54 kg. The male is slightly larger than the female.

POPULATION: An estimated 9,000 to 12,000 cheetahs remain in the wild.

LIFESPAN: Cheetahs live an average of ten to 12 years.

RANGE: Once found throughout Africa and Asia, cheetahs are now confined to parts of eastern and southwestern Africa.

HABITAT: Cheetahs are found in open and partially open savannahs.

FOOD: Cheetahs rely on a burst of speed to catch such swift prey as gazelles, wildebeest calves, impalas and smaller hoofed animals, knocking their prey to the ground and delivering a suffocating bite to the neck. They must eat quickly to avoid losing their kill to other carnivores.

BEHAVIOUR: Cheetahs are typically solitary creatures. Females raise their cubs for about a year. Males sometimes live with a small group of brothers from the same litter. Cheetahs hunt in late mornings and early evenings. Chases last from 20 to 60 seconds. Only half are successful.

OFFSPRING: Two to four cubs are born to a litter. Cubs are smoky grey in color with long woolly hair, called a mantle, running along their backs. This mantle is thought to help camouflage cubs in grass, concealing them from predators. Mothers move cubs to new hiding places every few days. At five to six weeks, cubs follow the mother and begin eating from her kills. Cubs stay with their mother for about a year.

THREATS: The future of the cheetah is doubtful because of increasing loss of habitat, declines in prey, high cub mortality rates and conflict with ranchers.

PROTECTION: *CITES, Appendix I, Endangered Species Act.

**Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, an international treaty with more than 144 member countries. Appendix I listed species cannot be traded commercially. Appendix II listed species can be traded commercially only if trade does not harm their survival.*

FUN FACTS...

- The name 'cheetah' comes from an Indian word meaning "spotted one."
- Cheetahs don't need to drink water, as they get the moisture they need from the bodies of their prey.
- Cheetahs are the only cats that, while sprinting, can turn in midair to follow their prey.
- Cheetahs can accelerate to freeway speeds in just a few strides!
- Although fast, the cheetah cannot run at full speed for long distances (100 yards is about the limit) because it may overheat.
- A young cheetah cub has a long gray-blue coat and a black underbelly that rapidly lightens and becomes spotted.
- Cheetahs do not roar like lions, but they purr, hiss, whine and growl. They also make a variety of contact calls, the most common is a birdlike chirping sound.
- The largest wild population of cheetahs is found in Namibia.

HOW TO IDENTIFY A CHEETAH...

The cheetah is often mistaken for a leopard. Its distinguishing marks are the long teardrop-shaped lines on each side of the nose from the corner of its eyes to its mouth. The cheetah's coat is tan, or buff colored, with black spots measuring from 2 to 4.7 centimetres across. There are no spots on its white belly, and the tail has spots that merge to form four to six dark rings at the end. The tail usually ends in a bushy white tuft. Male cheetahs are slightly larger than females and have a slightly bigger head, but it is difficult to tell males and females apart by appearance alone.

CHEETAHS & HUMANS...

The cheetah's long association with humans dates back to the Sumerians, about 3,000 BC, where a leashed cheetah, with a hood on its head, is depicted on an official seal. In early Lower Egypt, it was known as the 'Mafdet' cat-goddess and was revered as a symbol of royalty. Tame cheetahs were kept as close companions to pharaohs, as a symbolic protection to the throne. Many statues and paintings of cheetahs have been found in royal tombs, and it was believed that the cheetah would quickly carry away the pharaoh's spirit to the after life. By the 18th and 19th dynasties, paintings indicated that the cheetah rivaled dogs in popularity as hunting companions.

The best records of cheetahs having been kept by royalty, from Europe to China, are from the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. Many emperors kept hundreds of cheetahs, at any given time, in their stables. With this great number of cheetahs in captivity, it was recorded only once, by Emperor Jahangir, the son Akbar the Great, an Indian Mogul in the 16th century, that a litter of cubs was born. During his 49-year reign, Akbar the Great had over 9,000 cheetahs, in total, which were called 'Khasa' or the "Imperial Cheetahs," and he kept detailed records on them.

All of the cheetahs kept in captivity were taken from the wild. Because of this continuous drain on the wild populations, the numbers of cheetahs declined throughout Asia. In the early 1900's, India and Iran began to import cheetahs from Africa for hunting purposes.

CHEETAH DISTRIBUTION...

It has been estimated that in 1900, more than 100,000 cheetahs were found in at least 44 countries throughout Africa and Asia. Today the species is extinct from +20 countries and between 9,000 to 12,000 animals remain, found mostly in small-pocketed populations in 24 to 26 countries in Africa and +200 in Iran.

In Uganda, a small population of cheetahs is found only at Kidepo Valley National Park, in the north-eastern part of the country.

LACK OF GENETIC DIVERSITY...

The cheetah, *Acinonyx jubatus*, is the sole member of its genus. Twenty thousand years ago, cheetahs roamed throughout the savannahs and plains of four continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America.

About 10,000 years ago - because of climate changes - all but one species of the cheetah, *jubatus*, became extinct. The drastic reduction in their numbers led the cheetah to become genetically inbred, meaning that all cheetahs are closely related.

In most species, related individuals share about 80 percent of the same genes. With cheetahs, this figure rises to approximately 99 percent. The genetic inbreeding in cheetahs has put them at greater risk, through low survivorship and greater susceptibility to disease.

CHEETAH CONSERVATION FUND...

Founded in 1990, the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF)'s mission is to be an internationally recognised centre of excellence in research and education on cheetahs and their eco-systems, working with all stakeholders to achieve best practice in the conservation and management of the world's cheetahs. As Namibia has the largest and healthiest population of cheetahs left in the world, CCF's International Research and Education Centre is based in Namibia, near Otjiwarongo.

The Cheetah Conservation Fund made their way into East Africa, by launching the Kenya cheetah project in December 2001. CCF Kenya works closely with the Kenya Wildlife Service to conduct research and education projects.

CONSERVATION STATUS...

Once widespread across arid Africa, into the Middle East and east to India, the cheetah has suffered dramatic declines over the last century. It now lives in Africa, and a few may survive in Iran. Hunted for their spotted coats and because they sometimes attack livestock, they disappeared from many areas. More recently, widespread habitat destruction has fragmented cheetah habitats, isolating many populations. In many areas, the cheetah's prey has been overhunted by people. Scientists have also found that many cheetahs suffer from genetic defects due to inbreeding, possibly the result of a population bottleneck – a sharp decline – that occurred perhaps as far back as 10,000 years ago. Among other things, inbreeding could raise cub mortality, lower cheetahs' resistance to disease, and cause infertility. An estimated 8,000 to 10,000 wild cheetahs survive.

Cheetah strongholds, where possible, must be connected to allow genetic interchange if this species is to survive. Also, conflict between cheetahs and humans has to be moderated in order to preserve this magnificent, graceful animal.

“Take nothing but photographs & leave nothing but footprints.”

Global Interlink Conservation Update compiled by: MOHIT K. ADVANI

Credits: CITES www.cites.org; Defenders Of Wildlife www.defenders.org; Cheetah Conservation Fund www.cheetah.org; African Wildlife Foundation www.awf.org; Smithsonian National Zoological Park www.nationalzoo.si.edu; San Diego Zoo www.sandiegozoo.org