



International Cheetah Day happens annually on December 4th. The day is a chance to learn more about the cheetah and the threats it faces across its range.

internationalcheetahday.org

CHEETAH FACTS

RANGE & POPULATION

Once found throughout Asia and Africa, the species is now only scattered in Iran and various countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Home ranges in Namibia for males can be up to 1,500 square km and over 2,000 square km for females. Less than 8,000 cheetahs remain in 20 African countries, and less than 100 cats survive in Iran. Southern Africa has the world's largest number of cheetahs, representing one half of the remaining wild population

STATUS

Endangered under the United States Endangered Species Act. Listed on CITES Appendix I (Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species). Listed as Vulnerable on IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

HABITAT & DIET

Cheetahs thrive in areas with vast expanses of land where prey is abundant. Cheetahs have been found in a variety of habitats, including grasslands, savannahs, dense vegetation, and mountainous terrain. In Namibia, ninety-percent of cheetahs live on commercial and communal farms. A cheetah's diet consists of small antelope, young of large antelope, warthog, hare, and game birds.

DESCRIPTION

The cheetah has a slender, long-legged body with blunt semi-retractable claws. Its coat is tan with small, round black spots and the fur is coarse and short. The cheetah has a small head with

high-set eyes. Black "tear marks," which run from the corner of its eyes down the sides of the nose to its mouth, keep the sun out of its eyes and aid in hunting. Adult body length 112-135 cm; tail length 66-8 cm; shoulder height 73+ cm; weight 34-5 kg. The male is -°slightly larger than the female.

Photo taken by Suzi Eszterhas at Cheetah Conservation Fund in Namibia.



SPECIALISATIONS

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. Covering 7-8 meters in a stride, with only one foot touching the ground at a time, the cheetah can reach a speed of 110 km/h in ~3 seconds. At two points in the stride, no feet touch the ground.

BEHAVIOUR

Cheetahs have a unique, well-structured social order. Females live alone except when they are raising cubs. The females raise the cubs on their own. In the first 18 months of a cub's life they learn survival lessons such as how to hunt wild prey species, maintain a territory, and avoid other predators such as leopards,

lions, hyaenas and baboons. By 18 months of age, the mother leaves the cubs, which then form a sibling group staying together for another 6 months. At about 2 years, the female siblings leave the group and the young males remain together for life. Males live alone or in coalitions made up of brothers from the same litter. Some coalitions maintain territories in order to find females with which they will mate. Fierce fights between male coalitions, resulting in serious injury or death, can occur when defending territories. Cheetahs hunt in the late morning and early evening. They capture their prey by stalking it until the prey is within 10-30 meters before chasing it and tripping it with their

dewclaw. The prey is then suffocated when the cheetah bites the underside of the throat. Chases usually last about 20 seconds and rarely longer than 1 minute. Only about half of these chases are successful. In Namibia, cheetahs use play-trees (large and visually conspicuous trees, sometimes with sloping trunks and low branches) to observe their surroundings and mark the area.

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Cheetahs make chirping sounds and hiss or spit when angered or threatened. They purr very loudly when content. Cheetahs do not pose a threat to humans.

REPRODUCTION

Sexual maturity occurs at 20-23 months. The gestation period is about 95 days, and the average litter size is 4-5 cubs. The cubs are up to 30 cm long and weigh 250-300 grams at birth; they are smokey-grey in colour with long hair, called a mantle, running along their backs. The mantle has several purposes: it is thought to camouflage the cub in dead grass, hiding it from predators, and to work as a mimicry defense causing the cub to resemble a notoriously vicious species, the honey badger.

LIFE EXPECTANCY

Studies have not been conducted in the wild on longevity of cheetahs; 8-12 years is an average lifespan in captivity. Cub mortality is high for the species in both the wild and captivity. On average 30 percent of all cubs born in captivity die within one month of birth, and in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park, about 90 percent die before reaching 3 months of age, mostly

due to being killed by other predators.

NATURAL HISTORY

Cheetah relatives had worldwide distribution until about 20,000 years ago, when the world's environment underwent drastic changes in the Great Ice Age. Throughout North America, Europe, and Asia, about 75 percent of the mammal species vanished. Only a handful of the modern cheetah remained, having gone through a "genetic bottleneck" that resulted in inbreeding that now affects the species' survival. In c1700 BC the Egyptians worshipped cheetahs and individuals have been kept in captivity for some 5,000 years. However, they breed poorly in captivity. The many national parks and nature reserves of Africa offer protection for only a small amount of cheetahs. In these parks, lion and hyaena numbers are high and the cheetahs cannot compete with these large predators, which kill cheetah cubs and steal their prey. Evolution has favoured speed and not strength for this species. Therefore, most of the cheetah population is found outside of protected reserves.

SURVIVAL THREATS

Decline in prey, loss of habitat, poaching, and indiscriminate trapping and shooting threaten the survival of the cheetah throughout its range.

LEGAL PROTECTION

As a protected species in Namibia, people are allowed to remove cheetahs only if they pose a threat to livestock or human life. Unfortunately, some farmers will capture cheetahs indiscriminately (the "problem" animals may not be singled out), often removing or killing those that have not taken any livestock. Limited international trade in live animals and skins is permitted from Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana. Illegal trafficking in other parts of Africa, mainly for the pet trade, and indiscriminate capture and removal in southern Africa continue to threaten the survival of this species.

CONSERVATION

To help this sleek hunter of the African wild win its race against extinction, we must (1) help protect its habitat and ensure a place for it on Namibian farmlands and beyond, (2) aid in the conservation of the wild prey base, (3) halt the indiscriminate capture and removal of the cheetah, (4) improve livestock and game management, and (5) educate everyone about the need to conserve biological diversity, and the predators' unique role in a healthy ecosystem.

CAPTIVITY

Cheetahs are wild animals. Capture of wild cheetahs threatens the survival of the species in two ways. First, the removal of individuals reduces the species' genetic diversity in the wild. And secondly, cheetahs do not breed well in captivity. The Asiatic cheetah is nearly extinct partly because of its capture for private use. Special dietary requirements, special needs, and unpredictable behaviour make this a poor choice for a pet. Wild instincts remain intact even with tamed and captive raised animals.

