

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA



Seventy-eighth meeting of the Standing Committee
Geneva (Switzerland), 3 - 8 February 2025

ILLEGAL TRADE IN CHEETAHS: SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This document has been submitted by Ethiopia in relation to agenda item 40.*

Background

1. The cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*), a CITES Appendix I species, now inhabits only 9% of its historical range, with a global population estimated at approximately 6,500 individuals¹.
2. The **poaching and illegal trade of cheetahs are a serious threat** to their survival. It is for that reason that Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda introduced the issue of illegal trade in cheetahs at the sixteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties, in **2013** (Bangkok, Thailand, 2013; CoP16 Doc. 51²).
3. This CoP16 document outlined widespread reports of illegal trade in live specimens, the majority relating to cubs, with a high percentage of the cheetahs estimated as dying either during transit or shortly after confiscation. It was the first time the illegal trade in cheetahs was officially discussed at CITES.
4. Since CoP16, several studies^{3,4,5,6} have increased our knowledge on trade levels, geographical spread, and main drivers. It is now known that **the illegal wildlife trade is a major ongoing conservation concern for the cheetah**, especially threatening the Horn of Africa subspecies, *A.j. soemmeringii*, with extinction. There is a risk that this subspecies may disappear within our lifetime if the trade is not significantly addressed. Indeed, this recognition led to the **listing by IUCN** of this unique east African sub-species as **Endangered**^{7,8}.
5. A recent published map of overland trade routes used for illegal trade in cheetahs demonstrates that this trade has the potential to have impacts on cheetah populations across much of East Africa, particularly with ongoing improvements in transport infrastructure (Figure 1)⁹.

* *The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CITES Secretariat (or the United Nations Environment Programme) concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.*

¹ Durant, SM, F Broekhuis, P Evangelista, P Tricorache, T Asfaw, O Gedow & L Marker 2023 *Acinonyx jubatus* ssp. *soemmeringii*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2023: e.T231957008A232671735. Accessed on 20 March 2024.

² <https://www.cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/cop/16/doc/E-CoP16-51.pdf>

³ Initial study conducted after CoP16 through Decisions 16.71 to 16.75, which mandated the Secretariat to commission a study on illegal trade in cheetahs, whose findings were presented to the 27th meeting of the Animals Committee (Veracruz, Mexico, 2014) in Document AC27 Doc. 18, <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/ac/27/E-AC27-18.pdf>

⁴ Tricorache P, Yashphe S, Marker L. Global dataset for seized and non-intercepted illegal cheetah trade (*Acinonyx jubatus*) 2010-2019. Data Brief. 2021 Feb 8;35:106848. doi: 10.1016/j.dib.2021.106848. PMID: 33644272; PMCID: PMC7893423. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352340921001323>

⁵ UNODC's 2020 World Wildlife Crime Report; <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wildlife.html>

⁶ Tricorache, P. and Stiles, D. Live Cheetahs (Black Market Brief). Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2021). <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/live-cheetahs/>

⁷ <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/csp2.13052>

⁸ <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/231957008/259026788>

⁹ Evangelista, PH, NE Young, DK Schulte, PD Tricorache, MW Luizza, SM Durant, KW Jones, N Mitchell, T Maule, AH Ali, RT Tesfai & PS Engelstad 2024. Mapping illegal trade routes of live cheetahs from the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula. *Conserv. Biol.*, 12 10.1111/cobi.14412

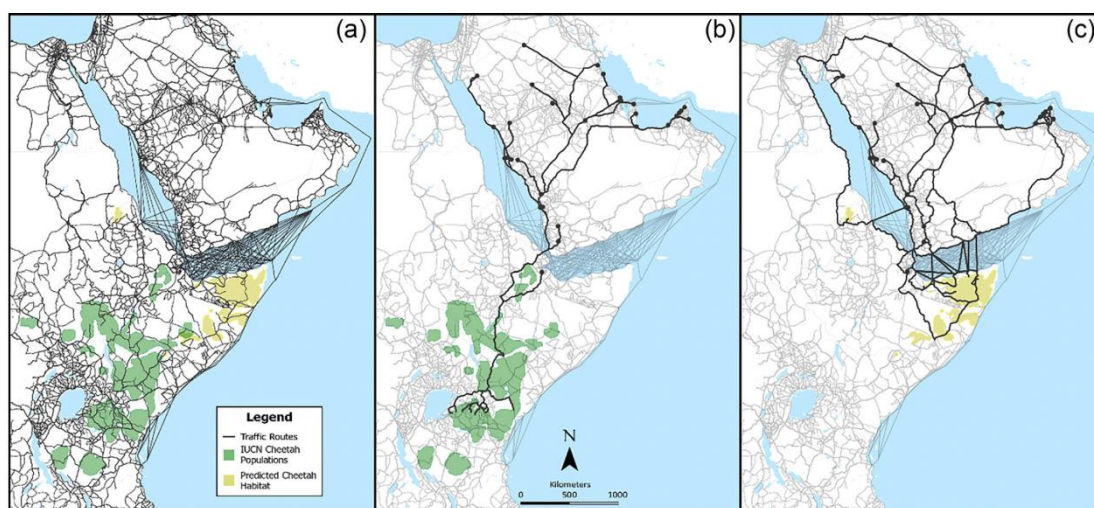


Figure 1: Model Output for (a) potential trafficking network routes from OpenStreetMap augmented by digitizing shipping routes, (b) predicted trafficking networks from a sample of known cheetah populations from the International Union for Conservation of Nature to known destinations, and (c) trafficking network models from potential undocumented cheetah populations estimated from our habitat suitability index (HIS) to known destinations.

Illegal Cheetah Trade: Scope

6. During the period 2010-2019, the average number of live cheetahs recorded in incidents of illegal trade in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula was 350 per year^{10,11}. **Between 2020 and 2024, this average rose to over 500 live cheetahs per year, a 43% increase.** Reported seizures, however, remained at approximately 10% of all cheetahs in illegal trade incidents¹² (Figures 2, 3).

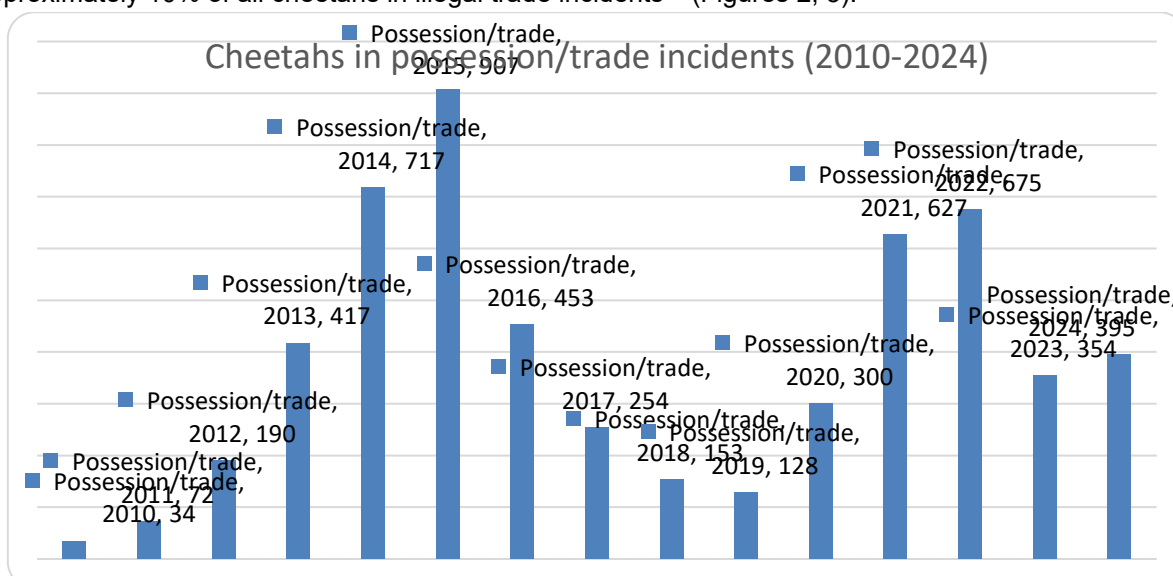


Figure 2: Live cheetahs in illegal trade incidents in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, 2010-2024.

¹⁰ Tricorache, P. Unpublished data. 2025; East Africa: Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia; Arabian Peninsula: Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen.

¹¹ The 2020 peer-reviewed study analyzed illegal cheetah trade incidents between 2010 and 2019. It identified 1,884 individual incidents involving at least 4,184 live cheetahs, parts and products. The dataset includes 2,316 online advertisements involving 528 sellers and 2,298 cheetahs, believed to be wild sourced. Almost 90% of these advertisements were on social media. During the last year for which data was collected (2019), 90 incidents representing 182 live cheetahs were recorded, as well as 5 incidents involving skin and teeth. Of the 56 implicated countries cited in the paper, Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia were the range States with the highest number of incidents, while Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE were the most significant transit and destination countries. Eight Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula countries represent ~95% of all identified incidents worldwide, involving over 3,800 cheetahs. The document also reported that trafficking in live cheetahs has continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period. Between March 2020 and February 2021, a 58% increase on the previous 12 months was recorded for the Horn of Africa-Yemen trade route. It is therefore understood that this is a regional problem, spanning the Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula, affecting Parties across the supply chain. Indeed, the paper also notes that fifteen of seventeen range States with National Conservation Action Plans recognise illegal trade in cheetah as a threat to country populations.

¹² See reference 9.

Cheetahs in Confiscations (2010-2024)



Figure 3: Confiscated Cheetahs in East African and the Arabian Peninsula, 2010-2024.

7. The **internet continues to be the most favored medium to offer cheetahs for sale**. In the period 2010-2024, 77% of all recorded incidents of illegal cheetah trade took place through the internet. Of these, 50% occurred on social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook); 41% through WhatsApp, and 9% on eCommerce sites^{13,14} (Figure 4).

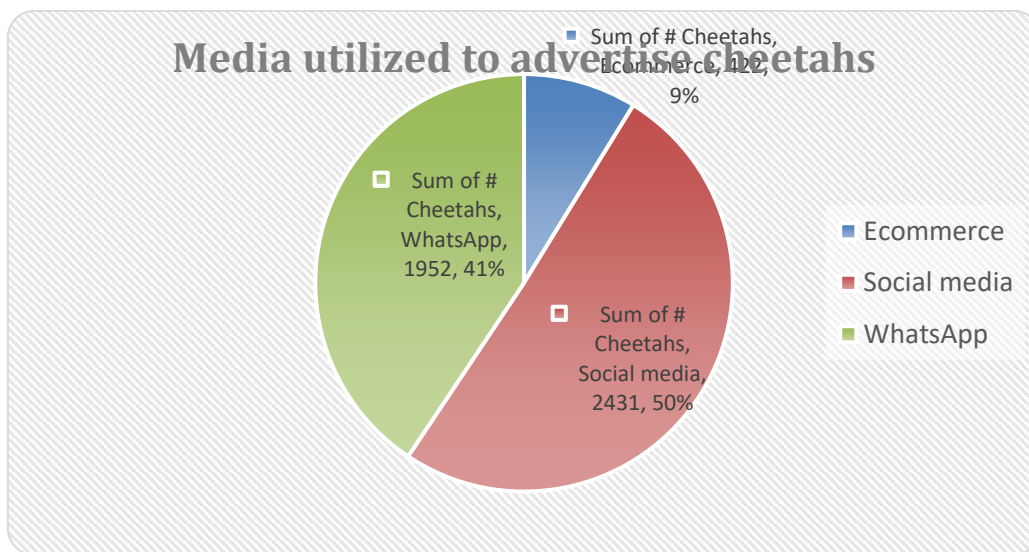


Figure 4. Internet media used by wildlife dealers to advertise cheetahs.

8. The number of cheetah advertisements identified on eCommerce sites has seen a considerable reduction since 2020¹⁵. The main eCommerce site that was used to advertise cheetahs and other exotic animals, haraj.com.sa (Saudi Arabia) often deletes these advertisements within 24 hours of publication. On the other hand, posts on Snapchat and Instagram Reels have become more popular among wildlife dealers; however, these are difficult to monitor as they also disappear every 24 hours. As such, the actual numbers of cheetahs advertised online could be much higher than recorded. Similarly, more dealers are using WhatsApp to offer wildlife directly to potential buyers. The reduction in use of eCommerce sites shows a shift in modus operandi.

¹³ See reference 4

¹⁴ See reference 9.

¹⁵ See reference 9.

9. Typologies have changed considerably over time. Sellers no longer allude to a sale, or provide prices or contact information, as they can be contacted directly through the platforms they use using private messaging. On occasion, they embed words or numbers on pictures or videos, which makes it quite difficult to find them through internet searches¹⁶.
10. In addition to single species trade analysis, Data, Analysis, and Intelligence Specialists Go-Insight conducted an analysis of trade in big cats through their new platform, CatByte¹⁷:
- Based on current data, legal¹⁸ and illegal¹⁹ trade records when combined reveal distinct patterns based on the specific cheetah commodities traded since 2010. Both sources indicate sustained trade levels for live cheetahs, with peaks in 2014 and 2020.
 - In 2023, illegal trade surpassed legal trade in the number of live cheetahs¹⁷.
 - While demand for live cheetahs continues, there has been a steady incline in the number of cheetah **claws** being legally traded (Figure 5). Big cat claws, particularly from tigers, are often detected in illegal trade, and traders have historically turned to other big cats as substitutes²⁰.



Figure 5: The quantity of cheetah claws found in trade (2010-2023²¹)

- CatByte assesses the current threat of illegal trade to cheetahs as medium to high** (range: high, medium, low). This assessment comes from an analysis of each illegal trade incident in relationship to risk factors such as the number of cheetahs involved, methods of illegal trade or smuggling, overlap with other wildlife and non-wildlife crimes, and the volume of commodities seized, and how these can affect the species. **Since 2018, most incidents involving cheetahs have been classified as posing either a medium or high threat**, incidents that posed a medium risk peaked in 2019 and 2020, while incidents that pose a high threat have remained relatively static (Figure 6). For cheetahs the current levels are primarily driven by the high number of cheetahs detected in illegal trade, which underscores the species' vulnerability to illegal activities.

¹⁶ MacBeath, A. & Peters, G. 2022. 'Expanding the Arsenal - Typology Reports: A New Weapon in the Fight Against the Online Illegal Wildlife Trade.' Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/MMFU-ExpandingTheArsenal-web-v5.pdf>

¹⁷ CatByte, 2025. Cheetah trade dynamics (2010-2024). Retrieved from CatByte Dashboard, accessed in January 2025. <https://catbyte.org/>

¹⁸ CITES Trade Data (2010-2024), do not represent the views or policies of the CITES Secretariat; CITES, 2022. The Legal and Illegal Trade in Big cats: A Study in support of Decision 18.246. <https://www.cms.int/sites/default/files/publication/The%20Legal%20and%20Illegal%20Trade%20in%20Big%20Cats.pdf>

¹⁹ Reported seizures involving the confiscations of cheetahs

²⁰ CITES Trade Data, 2022

²¹ Data for 2024 is likely to be underrepresented

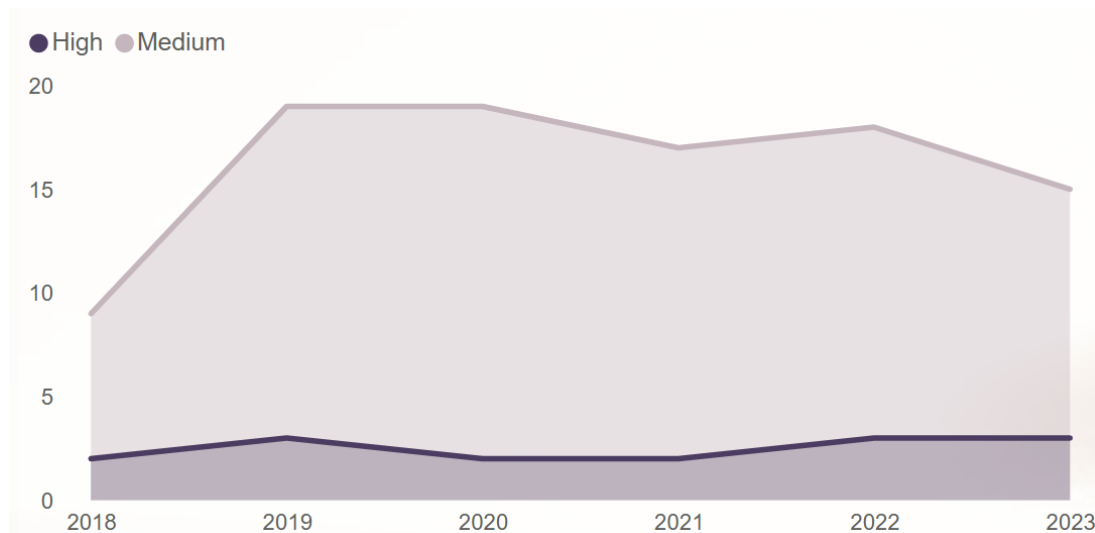


Figure 6: Assessed threat levels (CatByte scale) according to illegal trade involving cheetahs

Steps Taken to Address Illegal Trade in Cheetah at CITES – CoP16 (2013) to CoP19 (2021)

11. First introduced in 2013 at CoP16, the issue of the illegal trade in cheetah and its impact on wild populations levels has been on the CoP's agenda.

12. At CITES CoP17 (Johannesburg, 2016):

- a) Decisions 17.124 to 17.130 were adopted to combat illegal cheetah trade, directing the Secretariat to develop a cheetah toolkit and report on Parties' progress in implementing recommendations from SC66²². These recommendations covered public awareness, cooperation, enforcement, and disposal options. Progress was assessed based on responses to two Secretariat notifications (2017/039 and 2018/058). However, response rates were low—only Yemen replied to the 2017 notification, while the 2018 notification received responses from 17 Parties and one non-Party, but did not **include** key consumer Parties.
- b) Also, at CoP17, the development of the **Joint CMS-CITES African Carnivores Initiative**, focusing on cheetahs (*Acinonyx jubatus*), African wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*), African lions (*Panthera leo*) and leopards (*Panthera pardus*) was introduced. The Initiative was built out of the recognition that coordinated efforts are needed to address the conservation challenges faced by these species, including illegal trade, across their distributional range. The initiative was further developed and endorsed at CITES CoP18 (Geneva, 2019) and CMS COP13 (Gandhinagar, 2020), emphasizing the need for cross-border cooperation and conservation strategies.

13. At CoP18 (Geneva, 2019):

- a) the Secretariat presented a report (CoP18 Doc.60) on progress regarding the African Carnivores Initiative and the implementation of SC66 recommendations. Updates included the launch of a CITES cheetah webpage and a closed user group on the WCO CENComm platform for information exchange. **However, reports from Parties on their actions against illegal cheetah trade against the SC66 recommendations provided only partial data.** Despite this, **most CoP17 Decisions were deleted**, except for finalizing the cheetah toolkit. The Conference adopted this deletion proposal as Decision 18.193, citing the limited trade data available.
- b) This lack of progress in addressing illegal trade in cheetah did not take into account data presented in CoP18 Inf. 73, emphasizing the trade's impact on the extremely small and dwindling population of the most affected subspecies, the *A.j.soemmeringii* of the Horn of Africa. Information included in this document, as well as awareness and engagement efforts of source countries with the Secretariat and destination countries, increased the understanding that far from being 'limited', the illegal international trade in cheetahs continues to be a significant and urgent threat to wild populations of cheetahs.

14. At CoP19 (Panama City, 2022):

²² <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/sc/66/E-SC66-32-05x.pdf>

- a) The CITES Big Cats Task Force, was established during the 19th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP19) to CITES and convened to deal with convergence of trade in big cats, amongst other cross-cutting issues.
- b) In addition, decisions 19.104 to 19.106 on cheetahs asked Parties to strengthen their national legislation, information sharing through Interpol and WCO, and take action against the illegal online trade.
- c) In response to Notification No. 2024/097 issued by the Secretariat to implement Decision 19.104, paragraph d), **only Ethiopia, the United States of America, and Yemen** submitted information. The lack of reporting from **destination countries is disappointing**.

Moving Towards CoP20

15. Post CoP18 and CoP19, destination, transit, and source countries deserve recognition for moving forward in strengthening their **legislation to address illegal trade in cheetah**. However, the trade continues to pose a serious threat to cheetahs, particularly in the Horn of Africa, and hence there is a need to step up **enforcement in source, transit and destination countries and to address demand** in Gulf States.
16. Despite illegal cheetah trade being on CITES' agenda since 2013, the work programs and outcome documents of two key initiatives—the African Carnivores Initiative (ACI) and the Big Cats Task Force (BCTF)—along with adopted cheetah-specific decisions, do not:
 - a) Provide SMART indicators or clear endpoint targets to measure progress
 - b) Propose sustainable funding mechanisms for implementing the actions
 - c) Encourage greater engagement from demand countries in responding to information requests and reporting on seizures, while seeking to understand any challenges or barriers contributing to the current lack of response.
17. With the cheetah population of the Horn of Africa dwindling at an alarming rate, and with poaching and trafficking events still happening, there is a regional understanding that **more work is needed**, as evidenced by the IUCN uplisting of the unique east African subspecies to endangered, mainly due to its being affected by illegal trade.
18. The range and transit countries of Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Yemen raised this concern at SC74 in 2022 and Ethiopia is reiterating it now.

Recommendations

19. Accordingly, Ethiopia recommends that, in addition to the proposed provisions under 20.AA, the Standing Committee recommend extending the remit of 20.AA b) to include strengthening enforcement and collaboration (additional text in bold):

New 20AA. b) proposed: ensure that adequate resources and capacities to enforce legislation addressing illegal trade in cheetahs are in place, and strengthen enforcement and collaboration throughout the supply chain for cheetahs
20. In addition, given the limited responses to Notification 2024/07 and recognizing the need for operational efficiency and improved accountability under the BCTF, Ethiopia recommends that the SC:
 - a) not agree to delete decision 19.104 and include a new provision 20BB a) (see in bold below);
 - b) add a new provision 20BB b) (see in bold below)

New 20BB. a) The Secretariat shall issue a Notification to destination countries, requiring them to report on their implementation of Decision 19.104; the Secretariat shall then offer a summary report on any new responses to the CoP20;

New 20BB. B) The Secretariat, acting under the guidance of the SC78 decisions, shall request the BCTF to:

 - i. Develop and include SMART indicators (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) to track progress on key actions;***
 - ii. Provide a framework for monitoring and reporting progress against these indicators;***

20BB. d) The Secretariat shall report to the Standing Committee on the implementation of Decision 20.AA together with any recommendations it may have.