



CITES Cheetah Trade Resource Kit

Background Information

The cheetah is one of the most threatened big cats in the world. Although it was once found across sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and as far east as India, the species has been lost from 91% of its historic range¹. The major reason that cheetahs are faced with extinction is habitat loss and fragmentation; however the international illegal trade in pets and skins is also a very significant threat.



Cheetah Biology

Large Carnivores

Cheetahs are well known as the world's fastest land mammal, they have been recorded running as fast as 65 mph². They have developed the ability to run this fast in order to catch their prey. They have extremely flexible spines, which allows them to take huge strides when they are running, and a very light build.

Cheetahs are large carnivores – this means that they only eat meat. Wild cheetahs are extremely efficient predators, catching their prey in 40% of hunts³. Cheetahs mostly eat medium sized (20-30kg) gazelles and other similar sized prey, however they are opportunists and will hunt anything from rabbits and hares to wildebeest³.

Wide-Ranging and Low Population Densities

As well as being able to run incredibly fast, cheetahs also travel across large distances. They are an extremely wide-ranging species, with home ranges recorded as in excess of 2,000 sq km⁴, while even the smallest home ranges recorded are 200 sq km. They also live at very low population densities, rarely more than 2 per 100 sq km¹. This means that, for populations to survive in the long-term, they have to be able to access extremely large areas. Cheetah populations generally require areas in excess of 10,000 sq km of contiguous wildlife-friendly habitat to persist in the long-term⁵.

Cheetahs are very wide-ranging because they have to balance their need to find prey to eat against their need to avoid larger, more aggressive, predators⁶. For cheetahs to live in an area there needs to be sufficient prey available for them to hunt in order to sustain themselves, and to rear their cubs⁷ (see Subsection: *Other Threats – Prey Loss* below). However, areas of high prey density are likely to also attract other predators, such as lions and spotted hyaenas⁸, which may steal kills from cheetahs, and may attack, injure or kill the cheetah itself⁶. To avoid risky interactions, cheetahs avoid areas occupied by larger predators, which tend to concentrate around the highest prey densities. This means cheetahs are often found around relatively low densities of their prey⁶.

Social Structure

Cheetahs have a unique social structure. Females do not defend territories, instead they have very large home ranges that overlap with each other⁹. Males often do not have territories either, and roam across large home ranges, similar to female cheetahs; however some males hold small territories, which they defend against incursions by other males⁹.

Males are often solitary, but they will also often form coalitions with other males which can help them to establish and defend territories⁹. Coalitions are usually between brothers⁹ in the same litter, but they can be between unrelated males¹⁰.

Female cheetahs are solitary – they do not live in groups. Once a female has reached sexual maturity she will strike out on her own and will remain alone for the rest of her life, except for when she is accompanied by her cubs⁹. Mothers and cubs separate from each other when the cubs are about 14-18 months old, after which the mother will have her next litter.

Young cheetahs are often socially flexible, and both males and females may spend some time living in groups when they are newly independent of their mother, and before they are fully adult. The young cheetahs will stay together with their littermates, if they have them, and sometimes join up with unrelated cheetahs, for about 6 months⁹. When the females reach sexual maturity at between 21 and 24 months, they will leave the group to live independently, while the males will usually stay together for life in a stable coalition.

Because of the cheetah's flexible sociality, whereby males and adolescents may live in groups while females are solitary, the species is termed 'semi-social'.

Reproduction

Female cheetahs raise their cubs alone with no help from the male¹¹. While nearly all females breed, the level of success that different females have at rearing their cubs varies substantially from female to female¹². Some females never successfully raise a cub to adulthood, others (nicknamed "Supermums") successfully raise many litters and a lot of cubs¹².



Threats

Illegal Wildlife Trade

The illegal trade in live cheetahs and cheetah specimens poses a threat to the survival of the species⁵.

The historic capture of live cheetahs from the wild, to satisfy a demand among elites for cheetahs to use on hunting expeditions to capture antelope, is a key reason why the species has been lost from much of its previous range in Asia^{5,13}. In more recent years the focus has shifted to cheetah cubs in Africa, that are taken from the wild for the illegal pet trade¹⁴. As cheetahs naturally live at low population densities, even taking a small number of individuals from the wild is likely to represent a substantial proportion of the population, and therefore threaten their viability. Cheetahs are usually shipped in poor conditions with inadequate care, and thus cheetahs taken from the wild and trafficked through the illegal wildlife trade have a very high mortality rate¹⁴. This means that for every cheetah sold alive into the illegal pet trade, it is likely that several more will have also been removed from the wild population and died in transit.

In addition to the illegal pet trade, cheetahs may also be killed and traded for their skins¹⁴. These are used for traditional ceremonies and medico-magiques⁵ as well as being sold into the global fur trade. In Sudan, cheetah skins are also sought to satisfy a demand for traditional cheetah skin shoes for men's markoob⁵.

Other Threats

Habitat Loss and Fragmentation

Cheetahs are a very wide-ranging species and they live at low population densities, therefore they need to be able to access large areas of continuous wildlife friendly habitat in order to survive. Across much of cheetah's historic distributional range, areas that were once natural habitat are being converted for more intensive human-use and landscapes are becoming increasingly human-dominated. This loss of habitat results in a reduction in the extent and quality of habitat available for wild species.

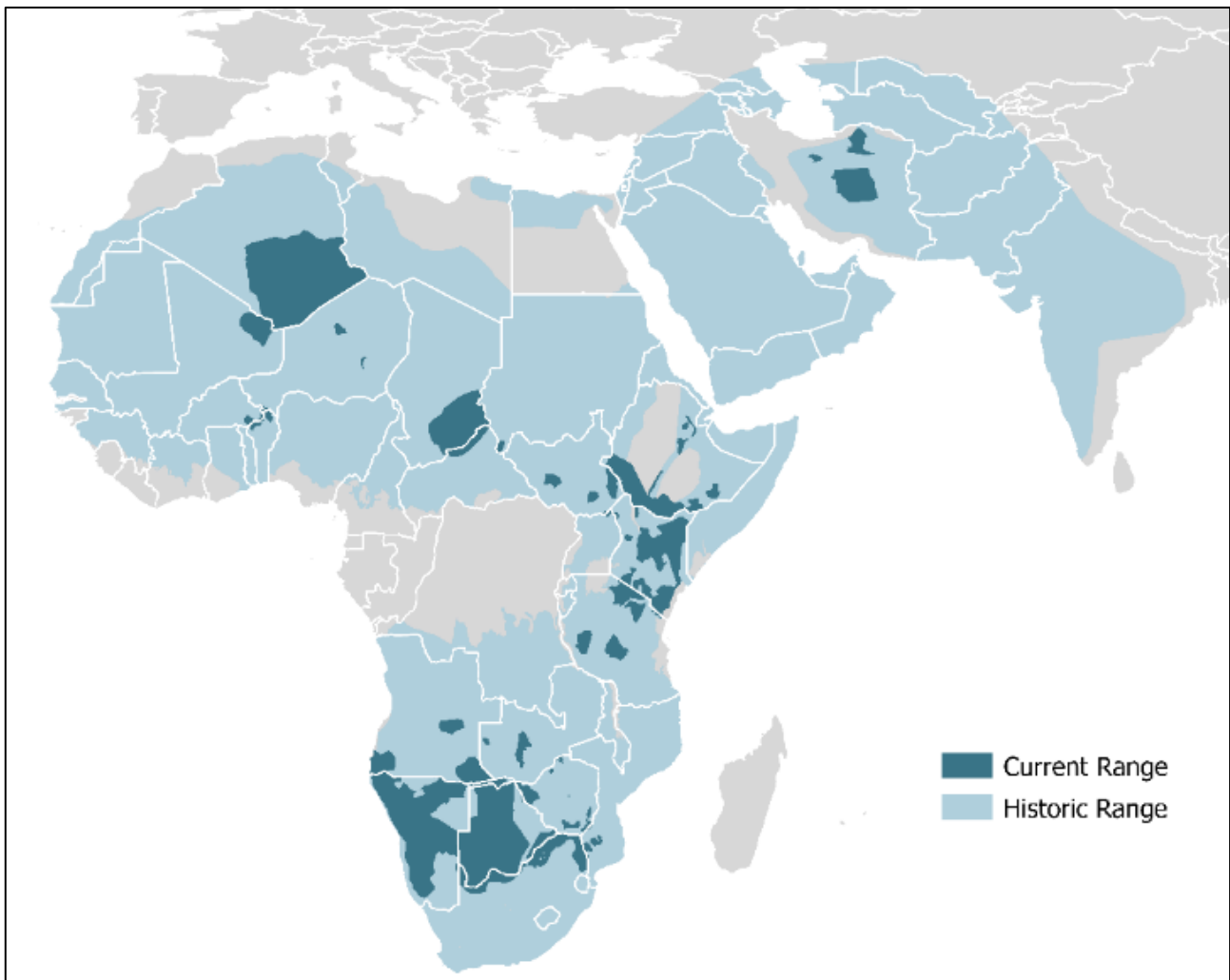
Habitat loss and fragmentation is one of the main threats to the long-term survival of the cheetah⁵. Although cheetah were once found throughout most of Africa and across much of southern Asia, cheetahs have lost 91% of their former distributional range¹ (see map on following page). More than half of the world's cheetahs live in a single population in southern Africa; 31 of the 33 remaining cheetah populations are thought to number fewer than 250 individuals⁵.

Human-Wildlife Conflict

Cheetahs are also threatened by human-wildlife conflict⁵. In areas where cheetahs come into contact with people and livestock, conflict can arise because cheetahs will sometimes attempt to hunt peoples' livestock^{15,16}. While cheetahs seldom hunt cattle, they will sometimes kill (or injure) small hoof stock such as goats and sheep. They may also be blamed for an injury caused by another predator. Thus, livestock keepers may kill cheetahs in retaliation for livestock losses, or to prevent future attacks on their livestock¹⁷.

Prey Loss

Cheetahs are carnivores and are therefore reliant on being able to find sufficient prey to hunt and eat. Natural prey species for cheetahs include medium-sized antelopes and gazelles; in some areas the populations of these species are reduced due to human pressures. This leaves the cheetah population without adequate prey and leads to cheetah population decline. There are several reasons why prey populations may decline; two key reasons are firstly, competition with domestic livestock for food and/or water and secondly, unsustainable levels of hunting. When an area lacks wild prey, predators like cheetahs may increasingly turn to hunting domestic livestock to sustain themselves, thereby increasing human-wildlife conflict⁵.



A map showing the current and historic resident range of the cheetah. There are now no resident cheetah populations in up to 91% of their former range.

Cheetah Conservation

CITES

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an international agreement between governments which aims to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. In the light of cheetahs' population status, the species is included on Appendix I of the Convention, where the following annotation applies: "Annual export quotas for live specimens and hunting trophies are granted as follows: Botswana (5), Namibia (150) and Zimbabwe (50). The trade in such specimens is subject to the provisions of Article III of the Convention". This means that commercial international trade in wild caught cheetahs is banned.

For further resources relating to the international trade in wildlife can be found on the CITES website (www.cites.org) There is a page on the website about cheetahs, where the Resolutions and Decisions that have been made relating to cheetahs can be found:

https://www.cites.org/eng/prog/terrestrial_fauna/cheetahs

IUCN Red List

Cheetahs are currently categorised as Vulnerable to Extinction by the IUCN Red List⁵, although two subspecies (*Acinonyx jubatus hecki* and *Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) are categorised as Critically Endangered^{18,19}. There have been calls for the cheetah as a species to be uplisted and categorised as Endangered¹. This is because the species is a "protection-reliant" species, meaning that the cheetah is reliant on conservation measures, such as large, effectively managed protected areas being maintained, to survive in the long-term.

There are thought to be approximately 7000 adult cheetahs left in the world, living in 33 subpopulations^{1,5}. Most of these subpopulations are small, with only two thought to number more than 250 individuals⁵.

International Efforts to Reverse Population Declines

The Africa Range-Wide Cheetah Conservation Initiative (CCI) has been active across the African cheetah range in supporting range states to develop and implement Conservation Strategies and Action Plans for cheetahs, at both the regional and national levels. Illegal wildlife trade has been identified as an important threat to cheetah populations by most range states across Africa and has been included as a threat in the Regional Conservation Strategies as well as in many countries' National Conservation Action Plans.

The Trafficking of Wild Cheetahs

As mentioned above, illegal wildlife trade affects the cheetah⁵. Due to the illicit nature of this trade it is difficult to accurately establish the number of cheetahs taken from the wild to be traded either as pets or for their skins¹⁴. Official records of seizures suggest that an average of three seizures of live cheetahs occur each year. However, this might not accurately represent the real extent of the illegal trade as most shipments of cheetahs destined for illegal trade likely go undetected¹⁴.

Available information suggests that the majority of cheetahs that are taken from the wild for the illegal pet trade originate from East Africa¹⁴. This is also reflected by the inclusion of illegal wildlife trade as a concern in the cheetah conservation action plans by countries in this region.

The most common destination for these cheetahs are the Gulf States¹⁴. Available information suggests that cheetahs are often smuggled out of East Africa by boat leaving from Somalia and brought into the Gulf via Yemen¹⁴. From there they are transferred over land to their final destinations¹⁴. It is likely that a very high proportion of cheetahs die on this journey due to poor housing conditions; a mortality rate of 70% of cheetah cubs with known outcomes has been reported¹⁴.

References and Further Reading

References

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Further Reading

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