Cheetah
(Acinonyx jubatus)
Conservation Profile Synopsis

State of the Species

The estimated total population of cheetahs is 7,500 animals, roughly half of the 15,000 estimated in 1975. Subpopulations of cheetahs have low levels of genetic diversity indicating inbreeding occurred during past population bottlenecks.

The cheetah has disappeared from 76% of its historic range on the African continent with less than half inhabiting protected areas and half inhabiting trans-boundary areas requiring international cooperation for conservation. It is estimated that less than 10% of wild cheetahs are contributing to the gene pool.

In Southern Africa there are approximately 4,500 animals living on commercial ranches where other large predators were extirpated. In Eastern Africa, there are approximately 2,500 animals. In the remainder of Africa, there are few reliable population estimates and cheetahs are considered extirpated or possibly extirpated in many countries. In Asia, a subspecies (A. j. venaticus) has lost almost all its vast historic range and now only 60-100 animals can be found in Iran, where it is listed as Critically Endangered.

High juvenile mortality rates are caused by interspecific competition with large predators. On the open plains in the Serengeti, this rate can be as high as 95%, largely due to predation by lions. Low genetic diversity within these subpopulations may increase the cheetah's susceptibility to disease with the most serious mortality arising from naturally occurring anthrax.

CITES allows 250 cheetah per year to be live-traded and hunted for sport and trophies; however, cheetahs are increasingly being illegally caught and exported as 'captive-bred' or smuggled into the Middle East to support the luxury pet trade. More than two-thirds of the cubs smuggled as luxury pets die in transport.

AZA Conservation Support

Between 2010 and 2014, 46 AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums reported taking part in a variety of field conservation projects benefitting cheetahs. Over those five years, the AZA community invested over $1.2 million in cheetah conservation. AZA institutions provide financial support to field conservation partners like the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), a nonprofit dedicated to conserving cheetahs through research, education, human-wildlife conflict resolution, Action for Cheetahs in Kenya and Cheetah Conservation Botswana. Several institutions directly supported CCF’s Livestock Guarding Dog Program (LGD), which focused on breeding and training dogs to patrol livestock farms as a non-lethal method of predator control. This is not an exhaustive list of organizations, but these efforts represent the significant ties that AZA-accredited institutions have with cheetah-focused conservation organizations.