

TOWARD A CHEETAH CONSERVANCY IN NAMIBIA

by *Elizabeth Braun*

Three hundred kilometres north of Windhoek, Namibia, on the farm Okaruikosonduno, the husband and wife team of Daniel Kraus and Laurie Marker-Kraus, who are also the Co-Directors of the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), strategise the future of the wild, free ranging Cheetah.

Outside the farmhouse headquarters of CCF, in dry savannah bush country, the antics of Gizzy, the now tame twenty month old Cheetah, are a great joy to the Krauses and their visitors. Rescued at the eleventh hour, Gizzy is a constant reminder that the survival and the future of this magnificent cat are by no means assured.

Residents of Namibia since 1991, the Krauses founded

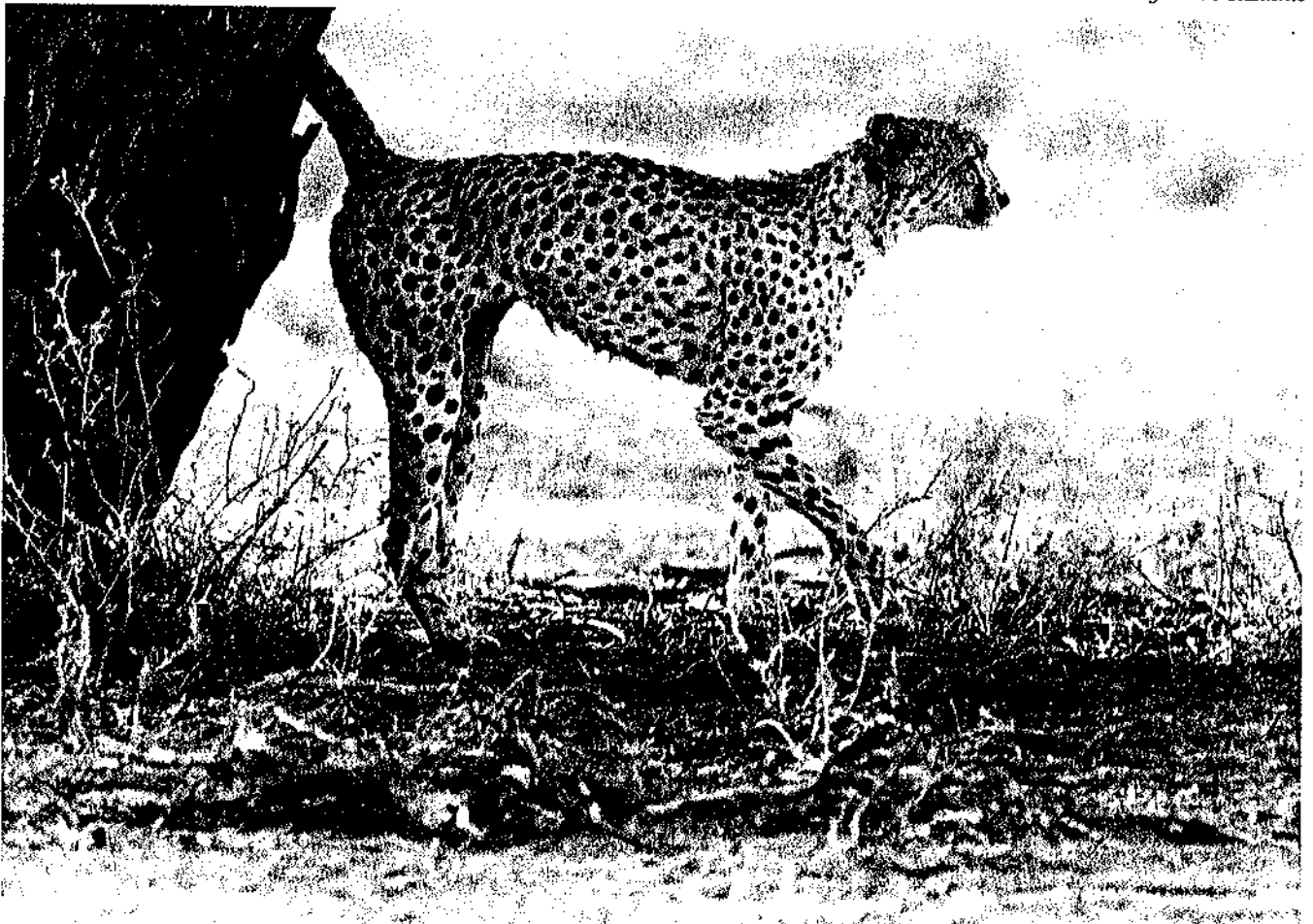
CCF in the USA in 1990 (The Cheetah Conservation Fund is part of the International Wilderness Leadership (WILD) Foundation) and incorporated the Trust in Namibia in 1992. The Fund's objective is to develop and implement long term multi-disciplinary research and conservation efforts for the survival of the free ranging Cheetah and its ecosystem in remaining habitats in Namibia and other appropriate African environments: in other words, to create a Cheetah conservancy. Namibia was chosen as the Fund's headquarters because it met the primary criteria for successful Cheetah research and conservation: it is a country of vast deserts, savannahs and farmlands, and wild Cheetah survive well on such terrain. Because of these conditions, Namibia today harbours about 2 000 to 3 000 animals, one of the last surviving healthy Cheetah populations in the world.

In its recent history, the Cheetah has had to contend with three major problems: the loss of its natural habitat, adverse interaction and genetic impoverishment.

Loss of natural habitat and human interaction: At the turn of this century it is estimated that about 100 000 Cheetah were alive throughout Africa, India and Asia; today the estimate runs to about 10 000 animals in remnant populations in Africa with perhaps a minute pocket of about 200 animals in Iran. The largest wild population survives in Namibia. The loss of the Cheetah's

James McLuskie

Cheetah scent-marking a tree





A typical play-tree in Namibia, where Cheetah gather and where they are easily trapped.

natural habitat is mostly due to excessive human population growth and the resulting need for ever more livestock and agricultural lands to feed people. This reduces the open range lands for the Cheetah and creates inevitable confrontation between animal and man, usually to the detriment of the animal.

Such human interaction has also created changes in the biodiversity of the Cheetah's habitat which, in turn, has led to a decrease in the number of species on the land and, by implication, to a reduction of natural prey for the Cheetah.

Genetic impoverishment: It is generally recognised that the Cheetah lacks genetic variation both in the wild and in captivity. An ancient animal that appeared on the face of the earth, possibly during the Miocene Age 26 million years ago, it experienced a severe population bottleneck about 10 000 years ago and was near extinction. This massive and later, localised, bottleneck resulted in a

genetically monomorphic species which is responsible for, at least in part, reproduction abnormalities, high infant mortality, disease susceptibility and death, increased vulnerability to ecological and environmental changes and thus highly impoverished gene pools for future generations.

The efforts and successes of the De Wildt Cheetah Research Centre in South Africa and its struggle to save the Cheetah from extinction through captive breeding programmes are well known; the Cheetah Conservation Fund has set its sights on saving the Cheetah in the wilds of Namibia. The efforts of both teams should make the long term survival of this magnificent animal all the more likely.

Of the 2 000 to 3 000 Cheetah alive in Namibia, 95% live on farmlands, that is, outside game reserves and conservation areas where the Cheetah have been known not to survive too well because of competition by other predators, particularly lion and hyena, for prey and predation of young. If problems of survival within protected areas are primarily due to the existential make up of the Cheetah, as a speed hunter prone to quick exhaustion and physiological inability to stand up to stronger predators in defence of the kill, the problems outside on the farmlands are equally formidable.

They seem to boil down to one simple realisation which, however, is excessively complicated in its ramifications: current livestock management practices and wildlife conservation strategies do not necessarily see eye to eye on how to accommodate the needs of both. The Cheetah Conservation Fund has made it a priority to help solve this conundrum by working directly with the Namibian farming community.

Rocktail Bay Lodge Maputaland – Zululand

Set in the shade of the Coastal Forest Reserve on the northern Zululand coast is the beautiful Rocktail Bay Lodge. The lodge is situated between Sodwana Bay and Kosi Bay in a secluded and protected wildlife area.

- Ten twin-bedded treehouses built on wooden platforms within the forest canopy, all with ensuite facilities.
- Central dining area and lounge under thatch where guests enjoy three excellent meals a day.
- Activities are geared for swimming, walking along miles of unspoilt beach, snorkelling, diving and fishing. (See Getaway Magazine March 1993).



PO Box 651171, Benmore, 2010
Tel: (011) 884-1458/4633 Fax: (011) 883-6255 Tlx: 4-28642 Wild SA

Elsewhere in Southern Africa

- "First Class" and "Affordable" overland safaris in Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.
- Fly in lodge safaris in Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe.
- Wilderness Safaris manages and owns the finest lodges – Jedibe Island Camp (see Getaway Magazine November 1992) and Mombo Camp (see Getaway Magazine December 1992) in the Okavango Delta, Etendeka Mountain Camp in Damaraland Wilderness Reserve and Lianshulu Lodge in the Caprivi Strip, Ilala Lodge at Victoria Falls and Chizarira Lodge in Zimbabwe.
- Scheduled departure dates are available.
- Safaris use the finest equipment and vehicles in the company of professionally trained excellent guides.



Steve Horne

Laurie Marler-Krause and Daniel Krause – dedicated to conserving the Cheetahs of Namibia.

Three governmental regulations have shaped the relations between farmers and wildlife. In 1967, Namibian farmers assumed ownership of the huntable wildlife on their properties as a result of such a declaration by the South African Government. Although a Namibian Nature Conservation Ordinance of 1975 classified the Cheetah as a 'protected animal' it permits, to this day, the shooting of a wild animal if life or property are at stake. In increasingly difficult economic times, this 'permission' appears to have been abused. The Namibian Constitution of 1990 includes provision for the sustainable utilisation of wildlife, the protection of the environment and the cooperation of the private sector in achieving these goals, but concrete steps have yet to be formalised to translate such mandates into action.

Namibia's farming environment has undergone considerable environmental and ecological changes in the past decades. Six thousand commercial farms cover 49% of Namibian lands. Fifty one per cent of these are cattle farms, on which 70% of the wildlife, and 95% of the Cheetah population live. The vastness of the territory and its ecology are suitable for Cheetah populations: male Cheetah range across areas of up to 800 sq km, which equals six to eight farms in Namibia, while female Cheetah range over a territory of up to 1 500 sq km, which equals 10 to 12 farms (based on 1985 radiotelemetry studies).

In the 1960s, Namibian farms expanded rapidly providing fauna and flora with improved water resources. The 1970s provided good rains and fostered good grazing areas; livestock and wildlife populations increased as did Cheetah numbers. The 1980s saw a reversal of the good fortunes of the 1970s; the drought of the 1980s decimated wildlife numbers due to natural death. Organised harvesting saved grazed lands for livestock. Over a two year period countable wildlife numbers decreased by 50% and thus prey availability for Cheetah as well. Cheetah were killed in large numbers since they were considered competitors to livestock needs. For example, between 1980 and 1991, 6 829 animals are on record as having been removed from the free ranging Cheetah population

in Namibia. As for long term genetic implications, the gene pool for the surviving population is thus further reduced and less diverse.

It has also been suggested that the livestock numbers were kept too high on the available grazing lands thus resulting in overgrazing and bush encroachment initiating massive environmental and ecological changes.

As for the Cheetah and its survival in such changed environments, the genetic impoverishment of the animal, and its decreased ability to adapt, further reduced its chances of large scale survival.

The Cheetah Conservation Fund has a unique opportunity in Namibia to blend various facets of the conservation ethic: to preserve the species of the Cheetah, to integrate the requirements of farming in increasingly difficult economic times in this process and thus to create a conservancy environment for the Cheetah.

This is exactly what the Krauses have tried to do for the past two years. In painstaking research and through massive interviews with Namibian farmers, the Krauses have found that slowly the attitude toward the value of wildlife on the farmlands is changing. Over half of the farmers interviewed suggested that the main solution to the long term survival of the Cheetah on Namibian farmlands includes conservation awareness and education, the existence of large enough wildlife populations so as to reduce conflict with livestock and improved livestock management practices. The losses of livestock due to Cheetah predation appear to be less than originally anticipated. Furthermore, an increased understanding of why the Cheetah has become a livestock predator seems to help the Cheetah's cause. Cheetah do not favour livestock over natural prey; it is changes in the ecosystem in favour of human cultivation that has created wildlife problems for the farmers. Ultimately, the survival of the Cheetah depends on re-balancing the ecosystem and the habitat so as to provide sufficient natural prey for Cheetah and other wildlife.

As for specific findings, the Krauses point out that Cheetah that favour livestock – sheep, goats and young calves – usually do so because of old age or physical impairment or because orphaned Cheetah cubs have not learned how to hunt due to their mother's death. Such animals can become 'problem' animals and should be removed, but this should not lead to indiscriminate catching and killing of other innocent Cheetah.

Cheetah problems on the farmlands seem to invite simple solutions: bringing the cows closer to the homestead before calving; integrating donkeys into the herds who will then become fierce protectors of the livestock; using a larger breed of livestock guard dogs.

A unique characteristic of the Namibian Cheetah's social behaviour is both endearing and potentially lethal: gathering at playtrees. Low lying trees with long horizontally extended limbs, they are focal points in the

animals' home ranges, easy to spot and to be used for trapping and subsequent shooting or sale.

The process of information gathering, analysis and the later distribution of results is a slow process, the Krauses will be the first to admit. But the slow turn around of opinion on the farmlands is gratifying, and the telephone call late at night informing them about the trapping of three Cheetah under a playtree and what to do with them is tonic after many hours spent talking with farmers about the future of the Cheetah.

In the multi-faceted approach to their work, the Krauses have extended their scientific data base through the opportunistic collection of blood and tissue samples of live captured as well as dead Cheetah, thus further clarifying the overall health and genetic make up of the Cheetah and overlapping other predator species.

In 1993, CCF will begin a programme to cartag and radiotrack Cheetah caught on farms. This effort will give much needed information on Cheetah densities, distribution, recaptures, movements and territories and will provide a better understanding for interaction between man and animal.

Short term successes encourage the pursuit of long term objectives with the ultimate goal of ensuring the survival of the free ranging Cheetah. Of these there are four:

First, the establishment of an International Cheetah Research Centre and a permanent base of operation for the Cheetah Conservation Fund in Namibia in the form of a self supporting working farm with research facilities and an education centre.

Second, the eventual creation of a Cheetah Conservancy on interlinking private farmlands to secure the survival of the Cheetah in Namibia.

Third, the creation of model programmes in Namibia that can be adapted for use in other countries with wild Cheetah populations.

Fourth, the reintroduction of the Cheetah into wild areas where there is a sufficient prey base.

Of these, each has a specific priority. The achievement of each one of these goals would not only be testimony to the dedicated work of the Cheetah Conservation Fund and its many collaborators but contribute substantially to the survival of one of the most enigmatic animals alive. In the meantime, Gizzy's antics in her enclosure at CCF headquarters continue unabated.

Elizabeth Braun is a freelance writer and producer, contact address *INTV Productions, PO Box 21593, Windhoek, 9000, Namibia.*

The Cheetah is an integral part of the history of the Endangered Wildlife Trust. The first funds used to establish the Trust in October 1973 were derived from Clive Walker's limited edition print entitled "Cheetah and Cubs". The spoor of the Cheetah was chosen as the EWT's distinctive emblem, now a familiar sight on vehicles, boats and aircraft all over southern Africa. The first project support by the EWT was a study of Cheetah in Namibia's Etosha National Park by Andrew Lowrey. The Trust has contributed to the Cheetah Conservation Fund's ongoing work in Namibia by donating R8 000 towards the cost of a Mazda B2600 Magnum double cab 4x4 vehicle for the project.

EXPERIENCE THE REAL AFRICA

If you wish to experience the Africa we are trying to preserve and conserve, then join us on an Afro Ventures scheduled Safari, or let us tailor make a Safari to suit your requirements.

WE OFFER

- Botswana** 9 day luxury accommodated safaris and 10, 15, or 16 day camping Safaris through the National Parks and including Victoria Falls.
>> **New: 8-day Kalahari/Okavango Venture** exploring Deception Valley and the Okavango Delta.
>> **New: 8-day "Wings over Botswana"** flying safari including Xugana, Tsaro, and Chohe Game Lodges.
- Zimbabwe** 12-day Zimbabwe Explorer
>> **New: 14-day Accommodated "Zimbabwe Panorama"** covering all the highlights of Zimbabwe.
- Namibia** >> **New: 18-day "Namibia Venture"** including the Damaraland Wilderness Reserve and the Caprivi.
>> **New: 8-day "Wings over Namibia"** Flying Safari including Lianshulu, Mokuti, Damaraland, and Hobatere Lodge.
>> **New: 9-day "River and Game Safari"** to Caprivi.
- South Africa** >> **New: All Accommodated 10-day Eastern Highlights and 13-day South African Panorama.**

For further information and our brochure call us on (011) 789-1078 or fax (011) 886-2349.

