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Abstract: We received two cheetah cubs (*Acinonyx jubatus*), a male and female, when they were weaned from their mother at four months of age. They had very limited contact with humans prior to their being weaned. Since we are a sanctuary and our mission is to give our resident cats the best possible quality of life in captivity, we embarked on a program to acclimate these cubs to human contact in order to alleviate the stress that would otherwise be caused by human proximity in the course of their care.

Bonding with Mother-Reared Cheetahs

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We received two cheetah cubs (*Acinonyx jubatus*), a male and female, when they were weaned from their mother at four months of age. They had very limited contact with humans prior to their being weaned. Since we are a sanctuary and our mission is to give our resident cats the best possible quality of life in captivity, we embarked on a program to acclimate these cubs to human contact in order to alleviate the stress that would otherwise be caused by human proximity in the course of their care.

We were mindful of the fact that exotic felines raised by their mother have no instinctual or acquired dependency on humans and therefore consider humans a source of danger or agitation. We also realized that cheetahs would be more apprehensive than some of the other exotic cats in a similar circumstance, as cheetahs are not the “top of the food chain” and therefore have instinctual defensive mechanisms that are not necessarily present in lions, tigers, or leopards.

Therefore, the degree of apprehension by the cheetahs towards humans would be heightened, as compared to larger species of exotic felines. Accordingly, the human contact was commenced with great care to be a non-threatening and supportive influence in the cats’ environment. This was done by quietly entering the habitat and sitting or standing at a sufficient distance from the cats to give



Louis Dorfman with 1.1 cheetah at the International Feline Sanctuary in Boyd, TX. (photo from IFS)

them assurance that they would not be approached or bothered by the human(s). In addition, we would move very slowly, talk very reassuringly and softly, and react to any indication of nervousness on the part of the cat by moving slowly away.

Initially, we would sit near the cheetahs at a distance of around 8-10 feet, moving slowly closer to them as they became more comfortable with our presence. Usually, after a period of time that varied from day to day, we would end up close enough to scratch or stroke their neck, being careful to only do it for short periods to alleviate concerns about aggravating the cheetahs in any way.

Our program of contact initially involved myself, my assistant, our executive director, and several interns and volunteers. Within a month or so, it became apparent that the interns and volunteers were not a positive influence on the cheetahs, even though they stringently followed the guidelines for interaction put forth. Our female cheetah showed defensive/aggressive movements several times towards several individuals. At that point, contact was restricted to my assistants, our executive director, and myself.

We began feeding the cheetahs while sitting next to their food, and soon they enjoyed eating out of our hand. At the time of this writing, they seem to prefer to eat out of our hand to eating from their bowl, as they will still sit up and look at us waiting for a handful of food to be presented. They are

now 18 months old. While feeding them, we occasionally stroke their neck or head; being careful not to do it to the degree it becomes aggravating or bothersome to the cats, but conditions them to the association between food and affection.



After feeding, the cheetahs generally walk up to a hill, which we built in their habitat, from which they can see the surrounding territory more easily. We will follow them and sit at distance of about six feet from them, usually waiting for an indication from them of a desire to be closer before closing that gap or touching them in any way.

In the warm summer days, the cheetahs usually lie under a clump of tall bushes. We lie with them at a distance that makes them comfortable; usually it begins at around six feet and incrementally becomes closer to the point where we occasionally stroke them. There are days they don't wish to be touched, and there are days where they will come over for a quick scratch or rub. Usually the female is the more affectionate of the two, but I believe that is just an individual personality difference rather than a gender trait.

On occasion, they like to play with dog toys with us or chase a ball. Sometimes I run with a boat buoy on a rope, which they like to chase. We have a zip line rigged up in their habitat upon which a lure is attached, but we don't use it much only because the female has an apparently hereditary-based occasional weakness in one front leg.

Our cheetahs are very sensitive to any movement or change in the environment, even if the cause is hundreds of yards away. Both our cheetahs become alert and uncomfortable if someone comes out of our nutrition center about 200 yards away and moves too fast or if one of our vehicles moves a bit too fast even that far from them. We don't have any other exotic felines with that degree of sensitivity to movement or activity out of 65 different exotic felines.

However, our cheetahs seem to be quite happy and content. They lie upon their hill quite a lot surveying the surrounding territory, and they enjoy the human companionship when we sit with them under their trees or on their hill. They will occasionally play with their toys with us. They show no aggression whatsoever to any of the humans who enter their environment. If one of us comes a bit too close too soon, they will just remind the intruder with a slight hiss, and then, satisfied they have made their point, they will lie back and relax. We, of course, always honor their reminder and back off a few feet, which always puts them at ease. We feel we have done the best we can to make two mother-raised cheetahs comfortable in their captive environment and at ease with their human caregivers. They show great affection towards one another with no aggression at all, and the mornings and evenings are periods of joyful and playful interaction.

We have shown it is possible to develop a bond with mother-raised cheetahs, but it does take a great deal of time, patience, respect, and sensitivity towards the feelings of the cats. Because of their instinctual wariness, cheetahs are a bit harder to bond with than other species. I have bonded with mother-raised grown tigers more easily, but of course the danger is also much greater.

