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Abstract: During a five months stay in Namibia, we helped with the completion of CCF's education centre consisting of the History of the Cheetah, Biology of the Cheetah, Ecology of Namibia's Cheetah Habitat; and the Future of the Cheetah.

An African Opportunity with Cheetah Conservation Fund Namibia and Kenya

By

Kayla Grams, Former Volunteer at CCF
Biological Science Technician, U.S.G.S., Grand Junction, Colorado

The Namibia Experience

I had the opportunity to travel to Africa to work with Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF). I quit my job and my friend Mary Wykstra and I traveled as volunteers, first to Madagascar and then to Namibia 1999-2000. We intended on staying three months in Namibia as that is all our visas would permit, however, we managed to stay five months to help with the completion of the Education Centre at CCF. This was a huge undertaking where we researched, developed and put together the Centre. The Education Centre was built so local and international visitors can learn and be educated about the plight of the cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*). Mary, Manda Friend, (Namibia) Graeme Wilson, (Namibia) and myself were the core people set to the task, however, the entire staff and volunteers



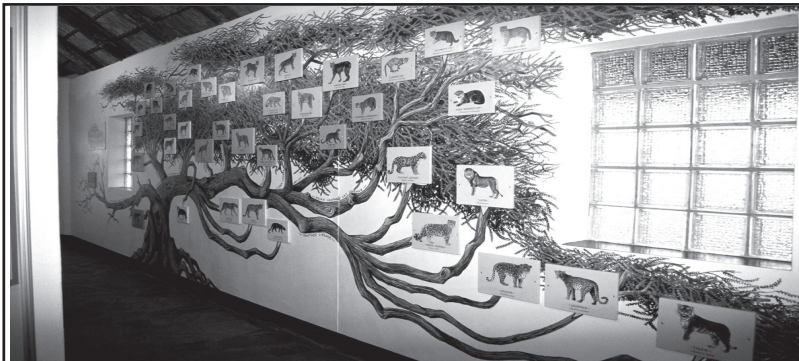
CCF Cheetah Ambassador "Chewbaaka"
(Photo by Kayla Grams)

at CCF participated. Elena Chelysheva, (Russia) and Johann Burger, (Zimbabwe) were the artists creating incredible artistic displays. We became a close tight-knit group and worked well as a team. Even with the job at hand, we also participated in research activities and care-taking of the non-releasable cheetahs on the CCF farm.

When we first arrived at CCF, they were still constructing the building. In the months to come, the Centre transformed itself into an incredible educational experience. There was a mad dash at the end as brick layers worked long hours, large graphic panels were put up,

and the finishing touches were made. The Centre was dedicated in July 2000 with a memorable ceremony including an appearance and ribbon cutting by Namibian President Sam Nujoma.

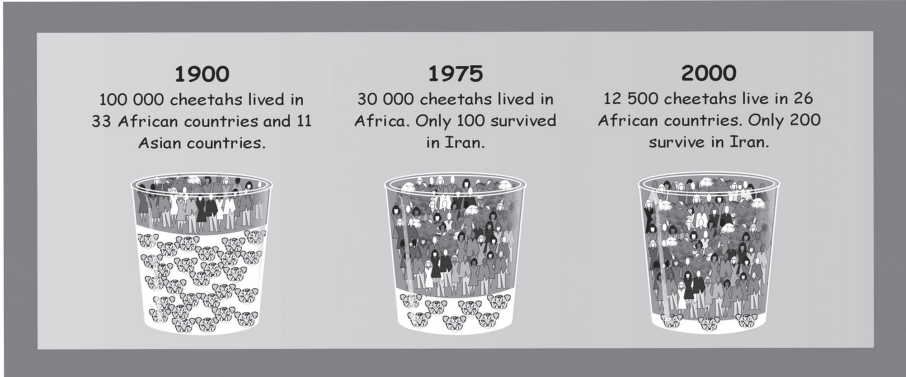
We developed four rooms consisting of the History of the Cheetah, Biology of the Cheetah, Ecology of Namibia's Cheetah Habitat; and the Future of the Cheetah. As you first walk into the centre, you see a phylogenetic tree which shows the ancestry and evolution of cats and where the cheetah fits into this. Then you immediately enter into the History Room.



Phylogenetic Tree in CCF's Education Centre (Photo by Kayla Grams)

The History Room

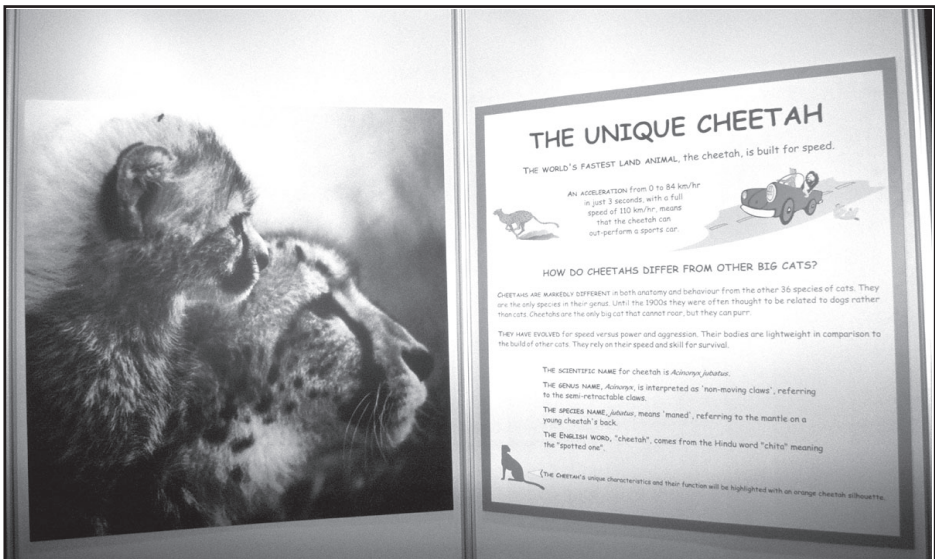
A walk through the History Room shows you the first cats, cheetah ancestors and briefly describes the genetic bottleneck they went through. Cheetahs have a significant symbolism to man. Since 1700 BC they were first tamed and used as hunting companions, and have been a large part of early history. Cheetahs were also used frequently in art. Unfortunately they are on the road to extinction. Namibia considers itself the cheetah capital of the world, having the largest population. In the future, there is still hope.



This Centre graphic shows the decline of the cheetah population over time. (Photo: CCF)

The Biology Room

The second room brings you to the Unique Cheetah and its biology. The fastest land animal takes you through its cycle of life, from birth to leaving the den, leaving their mother, and mating. This room gives more of a hands on approach to learning. In many places in Africa, cheetahs are mistaken as leopards. The cheetah is described from head to tail in various panels and hands on props. Each panel shows the importance of individual specialized body functions that makes them unique. Secrets to a successful hunt are described along with their behaviors and vocalizations. The last stage of their life is finding a mate and their eventual mortality.



This graphic panel discusses the things which make the cheetah unique. (Photo by Kayla Grams)

The Ecology Room

As you enter the Ecology Room there is an artificial tree and a trap. These are significant in Namibia where cheetah use trees, called “playtrees” as a means of communication by scent marking the trees. In order to “Trap a Cheetah”, cages may be placed at playtrees and surrounded by acacia branches. The urge to reach the tree is so strong that they walk through the trap. The information in this room describes Namibian biomes, parks and farming areas, the habitat, and where cheetahs live. Research has been ongoing through CCF to discover ranges and territories of Namibian cheetah. Understanding these animal movements will help them now and in the future. Bush Encroachment is one environmental threat facing Namibia’s cheetah where habitat may change over time. The cheetah’s prey and predator competition are important factors in their survival where predator control is a global issue. Namibian cheetahs live on commercial livestock farmlands and outside game reserves where all must deal with the cheetah. Management of land, livestock and wildlife is the key to the possible mission of saving the cheetah. CCF is the voice of the cheetah and has been working with farmers using Anatolian Shepherds in their guard dog program, and working with conservancies to find solutions for both man and cheetah. Friendly farming practices are encouraged and CCF staff strive to work with farmers to create a better future for all.

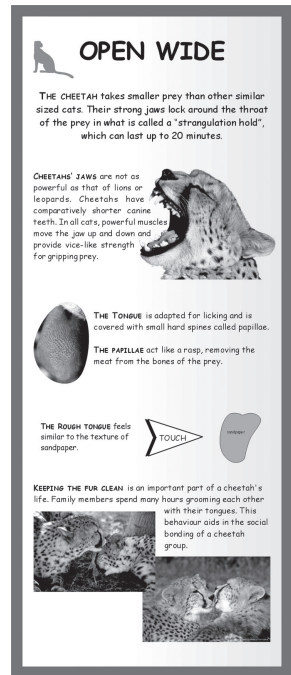


Photo by Kayla Grams



(Photo by Kayla Grams)

The Future Room

The Ecology Room blends with the room of the future. The role of zoos, teachers, schools and those who learn can help save the cheetah. Education and outreach are key to their future. Research is ongoing including human impact, population biology, health and reproduction and ecology. There are many voices out there willing to save this incredible animal. In the web of life it is hoped that

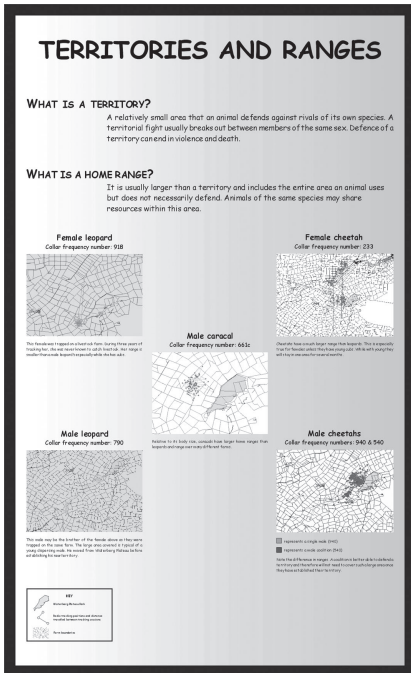


Photo: CCF

individuals, cooperative efforts, working with animals in their environment and working with captive animals will help cheetahs win the race for survival.

A classroom sits at the end of the Centre and opens up a window into the future of the cheetah. As you leave the centre “Open your Eyes” is the message at the Donor Board.

The Education Centre is not all we were involved in. There is a lot to do on the farm which is 30 minutes from Otjiwarongo, the nearest town. There are numerous cheetah that cannot be released back into the wild that are cared for on the farm. Having been involved in carcass feeding in the zoo, this was a treat to be able to feed just carcass food. If any medical work-ups were needed, we were all involved. We worked up the captive as well as the wild cheetah. We had an incredible learning experience with a hands-on opportunity to take measurements, draw blood, radio collar, ear tag and release them back into the wild. An experience I will never forget! We also worked on a leopard and caracal. Weekly surveys of radio collared cheetah were done and I had the opportunity to fly twice. I accompanied CCF staff on various occasions

where farmers had trapped cheetah. We also enjoyed time on the farm watching Chewbaaka, Dr. Marker’s hand-raised cheetah, run through a lure course. CCF Namibia is well worth the visit or even a chance to volunteer.

The Kenyan Experience

Mary Wykstra, who I traveled with to Namibia, headed back to Africa in 2001 to develop a Cheetah Conservation program in Kenya. Under the umbrella of Cheetah Conservation Fund the first three years she stayed on the Delamere Soysambu Farm to determine if this was a good area to reintroduce cheetah. It was determined that it was not a good place as there is too much human activity on and around the farm. I visited Mary in 2004 and helped out for two months. My experience here was much different than Namibia. Establishing a means to conserve wildlife from the ground up can be a difficult, frustrating and strenuous task at times. Much of Mary’s time is spent talking to individuals and groups and making contacts to exchange ideas, establish



Photo: CCF

education programs, and discuss concerns with problem animals in hopes of finding solutions. It is not as easy as making a phone call, which is what Mary could do, however, what makes a huge difference is going out and meeting people and talking to them. Travel is required a lot of the time and the Kenyan roads are not something to be desired!

Mary and her research assistant Cosmas Wambua are currently working with a community near Machakos in which they are dealing with problem cheetahs. The land is quickly being snatched up and subdivided into small plots.

Trees are cut down and there is no place for the wildlife to seek refuge, so they disperse into farm and community areas and reek havoc. For a man who owns only nine goats, if three are killed, it is considered a huge loss as this is his livelihood. You cannot fault the man for wanting to kill the cheetah. The importance to the survival of the cheetah in Kenya is working with people, educating people and empowering them to find solutions for co-existing with the cheetah. This is not an easy task, but as I watched Mary in her work I could see there is hope. I met one man who once wanted to kill the cheetah, but is now able to watch them at a distance. With Mary and Cosmas's help, Lumumba Mutiso became educated regarding the cheetah and now wants to save this species. Lumumba has convinced his community that cheetahs should survive.



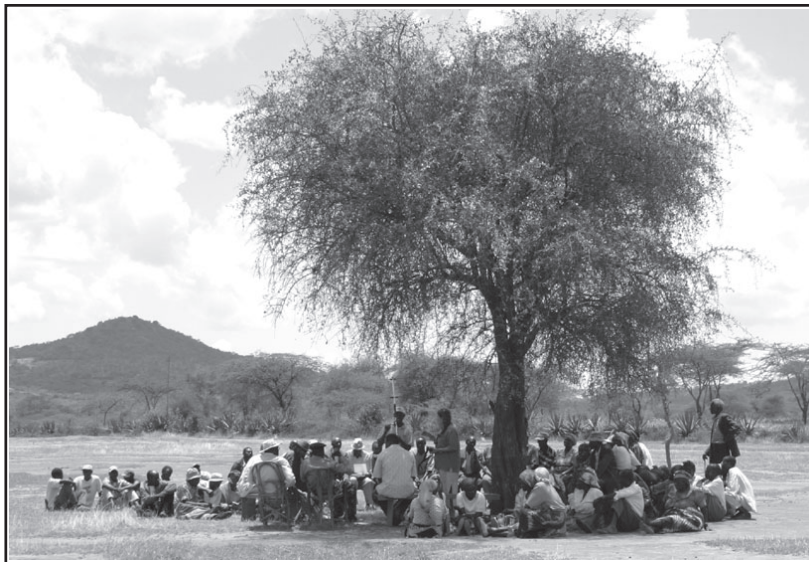
The author (at right) and another CCF volunteer releasing a cheetah back into the wild. *(Photo by Mary Wykstra)*



At left: Cosmas Wambua conducts a meeting with local farmers to find ways in which they can co-exist with the cheetah. CCF works with local communities to help the people understand the importance of conservation of the remaining cheetah population. *(Photo by Kayla Grams)*

Mary and Cosmas have met with this community on numerous occasions and the community has embraced them. I went to a baraza (public meeting) with them on a couple of occasions. After helping Mary and Cosmas learn how to use the radio collar and tracking antennae, we showed participants at the baraza the equipment and what we could do with the equipment. The community is supportive of this project, however, the struggle continues as poaching is very common in this country. Compensation for the loss of livestock is an increasing issue and in the forefront of the

requests from the community. Mary knows that such a program could be a double edged sword, but by working in the community she has developed a proposal that would require financial and logistical input from the members of the farming community.



A community meeting between local farmers and CCF representatives.
(Photo by Kayla Grams)

CCF Kenya has received permission to continue cheetah conservation research and program development through 2007. I applaud Mary for her passion and unending desire to fight for this species. Regardless of all her struggles and frustrations there is always the glimmer of hope that keeps her as well as others in the conservation and research field moving forward. If you are interested in volunteering or knowing more about the work in Kenya and Namibia there are more papers in this issue that describe these projects.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Cheetah Conservation Fund for permission to use their Education Panel Graphics for this paper.



A Tear

*From a distance there is a tear,
Receiving one, but stalking all.
The dark eye watches you from
Within the tall grasses.
Come closer,
The muscles become tense,
Suddenly there is dust of speed,
A strong body curved with strength
Gets his one.
As he lies with pride,
You will notice
The tear is a cry
For Survival.*

Cindy Du Toit, Grade 9.



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The Tear from The Orphan Calf and the Magical Cheetah,
Cheetah Conservation Fund (1996) p. 13.