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Abstract: Survey of the status of cheetahs living in five southern Africa's countries show that habitat destruction, disappearance of prey and direct killing are the principal threats.

Worldwide Survey of the Status of Cheetahs Living in the Wild

Despite the fact that most specialists agree that the cheetahs are highly endangered over most of their range, we know very little about their precise distribution and the local threats to their survival. In collaboration with Dr. Tim Caro, I am leading a project that is assessing the spatial distribution of cheetahs over the African continent and the survival problems they face in order to devise a plan for effective conservation in the field. A country-by-country approach is being used and the survey is based on questionnaire and interview campaigns.

The first phase of the project took place between June 1989 and March 1990. Five countries were surveyed: Malawi, Botswana, South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe. Kenya and Uganda were surveyed from May to September 1990.

Habitat destruction is perhaps the most important threat to free-living cheetahs. Nevertheless, several other factors stand out as affecting cheetah's presence and density, but the relative importance of these factors varies greatly in different parts of its range. In Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, cheetahs are being killed in response to livestock losses.

Limited suitable habitat has nearly eradicated cheetahs from small, highly populated countries like Malawi. More surprisingly, the explosion of human populations and sedentarization of previously nomadic people in remote dry areas, like Northern Kenya or Ugandan Karamoja province, is now impacting cheetah populations that are generally considered as "relatively undisturbed." The causal factors are disappearance of prey in response to increasing local hunting pressure, as well as direct killing as a result of skin trade, because of livestock depredation, and even for local food!

My field work has discovered that many remaining cheetah populations are found in remote areas, very often along and across international boundaries. Therefore, international agreement will be essential for the success of any conservation strategy for cheetahs.

At the time of this writing detailed distribution maps are not yet available because completed questionnaires are still coming in to local bodies cooperating with the survey, such as the Kenya Wildlife Services, the Transvaal Provincial Administration, and Cape Provincial Administration in South Africa. The next phase of the project will deal with the remaining countries of the cheetah range in Eastern and Southern Africa: Tanzania, Zambia and Southern Zaire. Some of these areas will be covered in the Summer of 1991.

After that, a detailed biological analysis will be made of the Southern and Eastern regions when all data have been collected.

The project is housed at the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Biology at University of California-Davis, where the database has been set up and where a conservation plan for cheetahs in Africa will be designed, as part of a PhD thesis.

In the long term, plans are to cover the entire African continent and the few regions in Asia that might still hold cheetah populations. Many organizations have helped with funding this project thus far, including Columbus Zoo and the San Diego Zoological Society. However, we are still actively searching for funds to carry out the next two phases of the project.

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