

Hunter L. 1996. Clash of the cheetahs. BBC Wildlife.

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Abstract: A recorded case of cannibalism between competitive cheetah's males. An established pair of male cheetahs in South Africa's Phinda Resource Reserve attacked and killed a single male in their home range and proceeded to feed from the carcass. The territorial pair fought very aggressively, inflicting severe injuries before killing their victims with a suffocating bite on the throat.

Clash of the cheetahs

CANNIBALISM New behaviour on the South African plains.

Recent studies on reintroduced carnivores have revealed some previously undocumented behaviour in cheetahs: cannibalism. In two separate clashes over territory, an established pair of male cheetahs in South Africa's Phinda Resource Reserve, attacked and killed a single male in their home-range and proceeded to feed from the carcass. The territorial pair fought very aggressively, inflicting severe injuries before killing their victims with a suffocating bite to the throat. This aggression continued long after the victims were dead, and the carcasses were repeatedly mauled for more than an hour (*African Journal of Ecology*, vol. 33, pp169-71).

The killing of single males is not unusual. Like other large carnivores, male cheetahs do not tolerate unrelated competitors in their territories, and fights to the death are not uncommon. But in both cases, the victorious males partially consumed their rival, eating most of the muscle mass of the hind legs and abdomen. This is particularly unusual because cheetahs are notable among cats for having specific feeding habits.

Why, then, did it occur? The most obvious answer is that they were simply very hungry. In both incidents, though, the two males had fed less than 48 hours previously. Furthermore, in observed social interaction with female cheetahs and large cubs (including males), these males behaved without excessive aggression, and so it is unlikely that they were aberrant 'rogues'.

Could the fact that the cheetahs were reintroduced have contributed to the behaviour? The two cannibals had been



Fast food. These two male cheetahs fought the intruder to the death - then ate him.

BACKGROUND

Animal cannibals

- ◆ Cannibalism has been recorded in more than 80 species of mammals (including our own) and is widespread in other classes of animals. Among the cats, lions, tigers, leopards, mountain lions and some smaller species are known to do it.
- ◆ Well-studied orders, such as rodents and primates, give the most examples of cannibalism. But this may simply reflect the degree to which a species has been observed. Cannibalism is common in infanticide where juveniles are killed by adults as a strategy

used mostly by males to increase their reproductive success.

- ◆ Sexual cannibalism is studied mostly in spiders and crickets. In some cases, the male is consumed by the female before he gets a chance to mate (a highly effective form of mate rejection), whereas in others she eats him afterwards.

- ◆ It is thought that the male may give himself willingly after copulation, because the donation of his body tissues improves the viability of the eggs fertilised by his own sperm.

settled in their territory for 15 and 27 months respectively when the incidents occurred and had shown no unusual behaviour since their release, and so this seems unlikely. Perhaps the victorious pair was simply utilising the carcasses to replenish some of their lost energy after such a battle.

But though carnivores are sometimes killed in intraspecific battles (competition between individuals of the same species), they are not always eaten. It's such a rarely observed occurrence, a conclusion is hard to come by. It may simply boil down to a matter of individual taste. **LUKE HUNTER**

Baby love

INSTINCT Why we want to take care of teddy bears.

If you have bought a teddy bear for someone recently, it's highly likely the bear inveigled its way into your heart. When confronted with a creature or toy with large head and eyes, chubby cheeks, snub nose and short, thick limbs - the characteristics

BACKGROUND

Bear facts

- ◆ Young animals often have large heads, short muzzles, large low-set eyes and stumpy limbs. Konrad Lorenz suggested that these features stimulate in adults a desire to nurture, to ensure the baby is looked after.
- ◆ Our liking for baby features extends to cartoon creatures and pets. Micky Mouse's head proportions have become more baby-like since his debut. And modern breeds of dogs often have juvenile features such as loose folds of skin and short muzzles.

of a baby - adults have a strong urge to look after the helpless creature.

At the turn of the century, the first teddy bears had low foreheads, long snouts and long limbs like real bears. But over time, they have developed more baby-like features. A group of scientists, led by Paul Morris at the University of Portsmouth, was curious to know whether teddies evolved this way because children demand baby-faced bears or because adults did. They gathered together eight pairs of teddies, each comprising a baby-faced bear and an adult-featured one (*Animal Behaviour*, vol. 50, pp1697-1700). These teddies were shown to children aged four, six and eight years old.

When asked to choose their favourite bear from each pair, the older children (43 out of 54) preferred the baby-faced teddies. But the four-year-olds liked the baby-faced and adult-featured bears of each pair equally. When asked which of all the bears they liked best the older children chose baby-faced bears but the four-year-olds preferred ones with adult features.

The scientists also asked the children

what they would like to do with their favourite bear. The four-year-olds wanted to play with it, but the older children said they would like to sleep with or cuddle the bear. The scientists suggest that young children do not develop a specific desire to look after the young and helpless (whether toy, animal or human) until they are older.

Clearly, teddy bear evolution has not made it any more suitable as a child's companion or comfort object for young children and has been driven not by the selection of the owner but by that of the adult purchaser.

ANGELA TURNER

Teddy past: today's teddi are wider-eye and chubbier:

