

Schroeder-MacNaughton J. Survival of the swiftest.

Keywords: *Acinonyx jubatus*/cheetah/foster father/hand rearing/in the wild

Abstract: Five years research of cheetahs. He started in 1986 to rear a family of five orphaned cheetahs in the wild. He taught them the rudiments of hunting prey and killing it. A few lessons were all that was needed. Petal, the only female, joined her foster father when matured. He followed her movements over the next months. She introduced him to another wild female cheetah. Drummond's unique relationship with these wild cheetahs has proven his theory that young cheetahs can be successfully reared by man in the wild and retain their wildness. Let us hope that the introduction of foreign cheetahs can take place in the near future.



# Survival of the Swiftest

by Jamie Schroeder-MacNaughton

*A fascinating story and cry for the survival of the cheetah*

**W**HAT BEGAN five years ago as an immense challenge has developed into a network of relationships between a man and a group of wild anthropomorphic cheetahs.

Captain David Drummond, a wildlife conservationist was first given the chance in 1986 to rear a family of five orphaned cheetahs in the wild, no one could have forecast the outcome of that daring experiment. Their mother was killed during an encounter with a lioness when they were each protecting their young. The cheetah was no match in strength to the sizeable lioness and she was killed, leaving her five seven-month-old cubs motherless. David was called in by those in the wildlife sector who knew of his years of experience with cheetahs and offered him the opportunity that he so valued - that was the opportunity to prove his theory that young cheetahs could be successfully reared by man in their wild habitat and retain their wildness even after close human contact.

Of the four male cubs, one died after repeated intestinal complications leaving three male and one female siblings. For these cheetah cubs to have survived in the first place is close to miraculous as the family mortality rate for these cats is usually about 80 per cent.

David, initially, had to act as foster father teaching them the rudiments of hunting prey and killing it. He would do this by walking with them and giving chase after hares until finally the cubs understood the game and they too chased and successfully demobilized them. The most useful lesson was that of gripping the animal by the windpipe to suffocate it quickly. A few lessons was all that was needed. Before the cubs were old enough to hunt, it was agreed that range feeding would be permitted.

As sisters and brothers matured, the female was constantly harrassed by the curious siblings. The day was drawing near when the group would split with Petal going her own way to find a suitable mate. Petal became more interested in and sought her foster father's company rather than that of her brothers. She would join him at his vehicle and recline on the bonnet for long naps, or she would rest near him when he enjoyed the shade of a tree. This interested Captain Drummond as he was unsure of what this behaviour would lead to. He had not long to wait. When the family reached 20 months of age, Petal left the group. With the three males quite compatible and able to fend for themselves, David did not feel the need to play as large a role in their lives any longer. His loyalties, thus, were swayed



*Sprite, Petal, and Scamp.*

toward Petal and he followed her movements over the next months. Their relationship developed further until they were able to 'communicate' easily in the bird-like whistle of the cheetah species. Petal was wild — there was no doubt about that as she shied from vehicles, and distanced herself from Masai herdsmen. Yet there appeared to be a willingness on her part to continue the contact as evidenced by her calls in reply to his, and the ease with which she sprang on to the vehicle and allowed herself to be inspected.

The two would walk for hours, Petal leading the way through luggas, wooded areas, and open plains being followed by her friend. It was to David's utter astonishment when on one of these outings, Petal introduced him, if you will, to an unfamiliar wild female cheetah. The introduction occurred in stages over a period of a few hours with Petal as leader. She stopped as they came within fifty metres of the stranger, so Captain Drummond stopped and then she continued slowly forward. She turned back to him briefly which he took to mean 'wait there' so he stayed where he was. Petal communicated between the two bridging the gap between man and animal. The cheetahs talked in their bird-like whistles and high pitched growls and David noticed after careful listening, that it was Petal whose voice was both louder and more assertive than the other. It must have been a younger animal which accepted Petal's dominance. She finally made physical contact with the other by sniffing noses and finally familiarizing herself with the

other's scent. David, in the meantime had edged closer each time Petal returned to him. When she finally returned she lay down relaxed, telegraphing to the other cheetah that this man presented no danger. At last the two were within five yards of the strange cheetah when they settled down under a tree.

Having made this immense progress with the non-anthropomorphic cat, Captain Drummond was elated, but the final act of acceptance was when the stranger got up from where she lay and joined her new 'friends' under their tree. She was now within touching distance of Drummond yet he knew that he must maintain the even temper of the meeting and refrained from showing his excitement. During these delicate initial encounters it was imperative that all movements were made slowly, anything that could be mistaken for aggression was minimized (showing of teeth in a smile, direct eye-to-eye contact, etc.) and no liberties were to be taken such as reaching out a hand to touch.

This episode could be explained in no other way except as an introduction of David, by Petal to a wild cheetah. Though purist scientists may scoff at the humanist interpretation of the animal behaviour, the fact remains that through Petal, Captain Drummond met this first cheetah and has since had like meetings with many other wild cheetahs.

Scientifically why is this relevant? Because the trust established between Petal and her foster father through these five years of continual contact, can now be taken one step further. It is believed that



through these anthropomorphic cheetahs, cubs, either orphaned in the wild or bred in captivity, can be introduced into the Masai Mara. This is vitally important for two reasons; the first and foremost being the need to enlarge the genetic pool in the cheetah population especially in the Mara; and second the rescue and raising of young that would otherwise be left to perish.

Tens of thousands of years ago, cheetahs went through a period of dying out which caused a population bottleneck in the species. The one remaining specie of the original five *Acinonyx jubatus*, now suffers from genetic paucity. (Spencer, May 1991). This trait, as explained by Dr Dolan of Stock Watch Ltd. Kenya; is undesirable because it creates a closed breeding structure. This causes inbreeding depression which shows itself through reduced fitness due to the deterioration of certain traits such as fertility and the mothering ability. Because there is a lack of genetic variability these animals could be more susceptible to infectious diseases as they have lost the 'selective advantage' of varied genes to help overcome new diseases. (Spencer 1991, Drummond and ole Moi Yoi 1991). With a closed breeding structure each offspring is homozygous for deleterious recessive genes (they carry two copies of the recessive genes). When they breed in their turn the recessive genes are perpetuated.

Cheetahs in the wild under favourable conditions still suffer a high mortality rate. The young fall prey to predators: lions, leopards, hyenas, and jackals; they are poisoned by farmers and caught in poachers' traps; natural selection also plays it's part in weeding out the weaker animals. The potential for survival under these 'favourable' natural conditions is small-even smaller when one considers the effects of inbreeding. The species' genetic makeup is being weakened leaving animals less fit than is desirable. Captain Drummond has noticed deficiencies in a number of cubs born to a female which bred with a related cheetah. When compared to their age-mates from other paired cheetahs, their growth is slow, and two suffer from what would appear to be a calcium deficiency.

What is the answer you will ask? There needs to be an introduction of cheetahs from outside the Mara and/or Kenya as a whole, into the Masai Mara area. 'New blood' from perhaps South Africa or other captive breeding programmes will enlarge the genetic pool. The introduction of this new genetic material through cross-breeding can reverse the trend of inbreeding and improve fitness over a few generations. (Dolan, July 1991). As referred to earlier - an anthropomorphic platform is already in place thanks to 'Petal' and another female by the name of 'Astra'. If these two would accept cubs unknown to them (wild orphans, or captive bred) and raise them as their own, as David believes that these females would, then the gene pool would be extended by nature with a minimum of human interference. Each addition of a cub from outside the Mara would mean an

expansion of the existing genetic makeup which in turn just may turn the tide in the cheetahs' favour and save them from extinction.

As Dr Richard Leakey stated only this past summer (1991) in the Friends of Conservation (FOC) newsletter, we must educate everyone starting with the peasant farmer that wildlife is a resource worth protecting. The cheetah has been fighting a losing battle recently. In the past 12 months in the Masai Mara alone, 10 of varying ages have lost their lives due to both predation by man and animal, and a further eight were thankfully saved through the ministrations of Captain Drummond, and financial backing from the FOC, and the authority to



*Dave vowed that the little cubs would not be left to die.*

attend to the animals from the Kenya Wildlife Service. A mother of two was temporarily blinded by the venom of a spitting cobra, an aged male suffered a sprain and would have starved had it not been for the above mentioned groups that range fed him, and a young male received lacerations from a poacher's trap which needed tending and also required range feeding for a short time. (KWS News, Jan. 1992). These are just a few of the day-to-day turmoils.

David Drummond's unique relationship with these wild cheetahs has proven his theory that young cheetahs can be successfully reared by man in the wild and retain their wildness. Let us hope that the introduction of 'foreign' cheetahs can take place in the near future.

This fascinating story continues as Petal, Astra, Polo and Maple have all had cubs, their offspring have all accepted their 'Grand-foster-father' - but it now remains in the hands of nature - she will dictate how many will survive to adulthood. Pearl and her family of five cubs were totally wiped out by a marauding leopard, and Petal, Astra, Polo and Maple have not escaped nature's selective weeding out of the weak. Science must take this unique opportunity to look more closely and halt the fading hopes for survival of this one remaining specie of cheetah - now heading towards the brink of extinction.

Jamie Schroder-MacNaughton graduated from the University of Rhode Island with a Bachelors Degree in Primary Education. She acted as observer/photographer and video-recorded many of these amazing sequences and now reports . . .