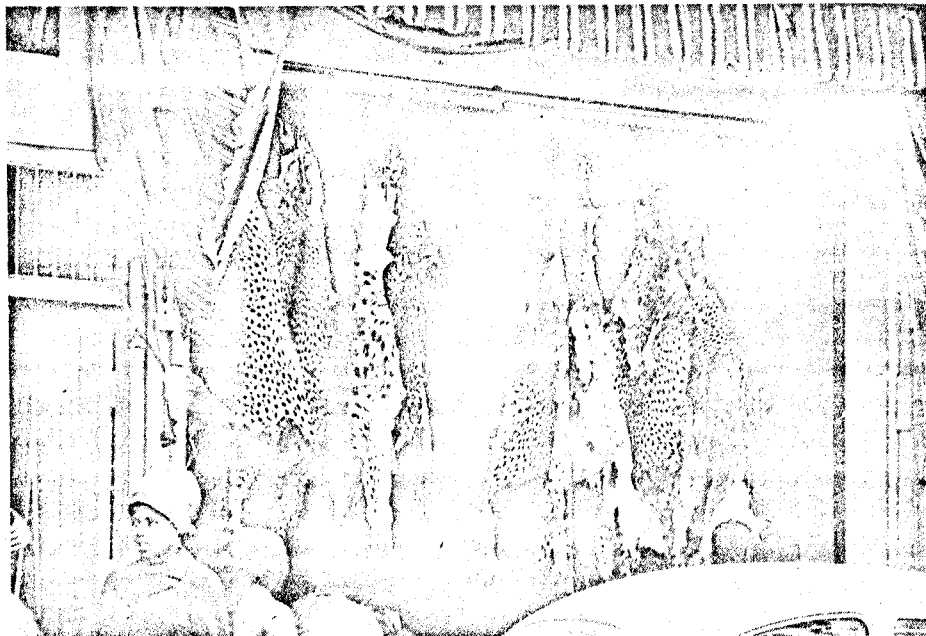


CHEETAH DILEMMA



Where do we put them?



Who says the fur trade is now under control? This scene in Johannesburg speaks for itself.

Even in historical times cheetah have never been abundant in South Africa. A few years ago Norman Meyers estimated that there were probably 700 left—100 in Natal reserves; 250 in the Kruger Park; 150 in the Kalahari Gemsbok Park, and perhaps 200 elsewhere.

It is doubtful whether there are as many as 100 cheetah in Natal parks, while the Kalahari figure also seems high. The 200 cheetah "elsewhere" must include the north, west and eastern Transvaal where they are still sometimes found on farming land or in private nature reserves. Nineteen animals are now also found in the Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve near Heidelberg where they have bred after being reintroduced from the northern Transvaal.

In captivity there are probably about 140 to 150 cheetah, because since 1973 breeding in captivity has been highly successful. So successful, in fact, that we are now faced with the problem of where to put all the available animals.

Today the threat to the cheetah comes not from its decline in protected areas, nor its inability to breed in captivity. Instead it is in danger because it is incompatible with human activities, it is not sufficiently protected, and the trade in skins is not yet at an end.

This is confirmed by Dr. Eddie Young, Assistant Director, Transvaal Nature Conservation Division, who writes in a recent report: "Cheetah are endangered for several reasons. They are being killed because farmers allege they kill livestock, their skins are valuable in the fur trade, and their natural habitats are rapidly being fenced in, so their breeding suffers."

While the cheetah is protected in the Cape and Natal, it has no legal protection in the Transvaal or Orange Free State.

In October last year Dr. S.S. du Plessis, Director of Nature Conservation, Transvaal, convened a meeting to discuss the dilemmas facing those who care about the future of the cheetah. Clive Walker, chairman of the Endangered Wildlife Trust attended the meeting with Mr. Mike Landman, Transvaal Branch Manager of the Wildlife Society. They asked that the authorities look into the continuing fur trade, particularly, as leopard and cheetah skins are still to be found in dozens of shops throughout the country. Although South Africa ratified the Washington International Convention on Trade in Endangered Species in July, 1975, there appears to be no control over the origin of the skins being offered for sale in the country.

As the fur trade may not be willing to control itself, and as farmers cannot be expected to "farm in a zoo", new laws are needed to cover both trade and the destruction of endangered carnivores.

In South Africa the cheetah is not endangered if it is in protected reserves, and its numbers in captivity are very healthy. Nevertheless existing laws leave loopholes which leave the animal unprotected in the wild state. Are we not tackling the wrong end of the stick in trying to classify species as "endangered" for the wrong reasons?

CLIVE WALKER