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Abstract: The world's cheetah population is estimated at around 2500, but we have very few detailed past records of cheetah numbers in Zimbabwe. Today's distribution records are based mainly on sightings that show they are generally restricted to the less-developed, extensive ranching areas of Zimbabwe, namely the south and west of the country, with three apparent main concentrations: in Midlands, in Hwange and Matetsi, and in the southeast lowveld. However, sightings have recently been recorded from the Chete, Chewore, Mana Pools and Chisarira areas. In 1978 the IUCN Red Data Book gave Zimbabwe a cheetah population of 400, however, by 1985 it was thought that the national cheetah population was more likely to be up around the 500 mark. From these figures it is easy to see that many of Zimbabwe's cheetah are not in protected wildlife areas and this raises serious questions about their future.

Cheetah under fire



Photo by Roger Bull

Hard on the heels of the revelation that Zimbabwe may have the world's biggest wild black rhino population comes the news that we may have 20% of the world's cheetah as well. Unfortunately they are often shot because of the threat they may pose to cattle — and in some cases the existing permit system is abused. JAN V. BYTTE looks at the cheetah's situation in Zimbabwe and at the steps now being taken to preserve the species.

The cheetah, although included in the cat family of *Felidae*, shows certain dog-like characteristics. It has long legs; it does not climb; and its claws are blunt and non-retractile except during the first ten weeks of its life.

The name "cheetah" originated from the Indian word "chita", meaning a hunting leopard, and is an Anglicised version of the Indian pronunciation.

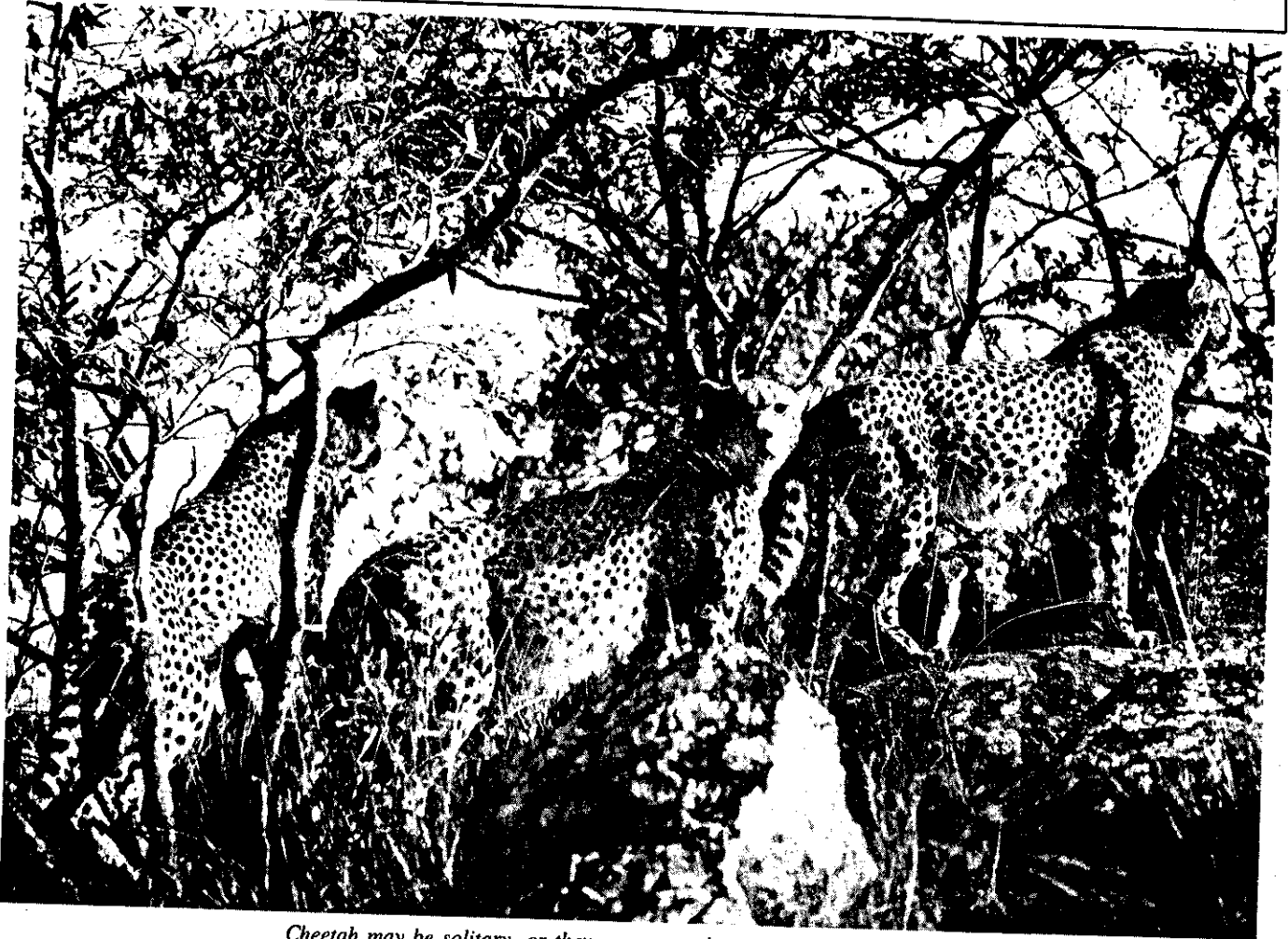
Interestingly, no fossil remains of the species have been found in Africa, indicating that this gentle creature originated in Asia and later spread into Africa, either independently or through its association with man.

It is now thought to be extinct in many parts of Asia, and certainly the last known Indian cheetah was shot in 1948. Cheetahs are still used for hunting in India, but these animals are now imported from Kenya. Perhaps we should note, at this point, that the cheetah is very amenable to taming and can be relatively easily trained to hunt small gazelles and similar animals — rather like domestic sporting dogs.

The cheetah depends on its sharp eyesight for spotting prospective meals and can accelerate up to a top speed of 110k/h in very short distance, relying on

outrunning its victim rather than stalking it as do lion or leopard. Cheetah are more active than other big cats during the daylight hours, but will hunt at night if the moon is full. They prey mainly on small antelopes such as impala and duiker, or on the young of larger species such as kudu and waterbuck.

Colouring ranges from tawny on the top of the body, to pale buff or almost white on the belly. Characterised by black stripes running from the eyes to the mouth, and by solid single black spots all over the body, the cheetah is easily distinguishable from the leopard, whose spots are arranged in rosettes.



Cheetah may be solitary, or they may occur in pairs or in family parties.

THE WORLD'S cheetah population is estimated at around 2 500, and in 1980-81 poachers accounted for a 6% reduction in this figure when 319 skins were discovered at Hong Kong's Kai Tak airport in boxes marked "mink" en route from Switzerland on a West German airline.

We have very few detailed past records of cheetah numbers in Zimbabwe. Courtney Selous observed cheetah near the Umfuli River in 1885 and on the headwaters of the Sebakwe and Umniati in 1887. He also sighted six animals near present-day Harare

and three cubs near the source of the Save in 1890.

Today's distribution records are based mainly on sightings that show they are generally restricted to the less-developed, extensive ranching areas of Zimbabwe, namely the south and west of the country, with three apparent main concentrations: in the Midlands, in Hwange and Matetsi, and in the southeast lowveld. However, sightings have recently been recorded from the Chete, Chewore, Mana Pools and Chisarira areas.

It is not easy to make accurate counts of this shy and retiring animal, and any quoted figures are liable to correction as further data becomes available. In 1978 the IUCN Red Data Book gave Zimbabwe a cheetah population of 400 — a substantial percentage of the entire world population.

Approximately 100 animals were thought to inhabit the Hwange area, 60 in Matetsi, 40 in the Gonarezhou, and 200 throughout the commercial ranching areas.

However, by 1985 it was thought that the national cheetah population was more like-

ly to be up around the 500 mark, after taking into account the animals recently sighted in the north of the country.

From these figures it is easy to see that many of Zimbabwe's cheetah are not in protected wildlife areas and this raises serious questions about their future.

The impact of man constitutes the greatest threat to the survival of cheetah outside protected areas. The threat comes less from the degradation or loss of habitats, however, than from the considerable pressure exerted by ranchers to have cheetah eliminated in areas where they pose a threat to livestock.

The cheetah enjoys legal protection in Zimbabwe, as in most other southern African countries. Nobody may hunt or sell cheetah or cheetah products without the issue of a permit.

According to Gary Sharp, a National Parks ecologist who has taken a special interest in the cheetah, 64 permits have been issued authorising the destruction of cheetah for stock protection since 1981. However, it is not known how many cheetah were actually shot in terms of these permits.

Unfortunately, says Mr Sharp, the cheetah problem is not always well defined, and in many cases leopard attacks are wrongly attributed to cheetah. In 1979 the Mwenzi ICA considered the situation serious enough to warrant the removal of cheetah from the Protected Species List.

Fortunately, this request was turned down, but there is little doubt that widespread illegal destruction now occurs. An unconfirmed report received recently by the Department of National Parks stated that at least 60 cheetah had been illegally shot in the Mwenzi area during the first four months of 1985.

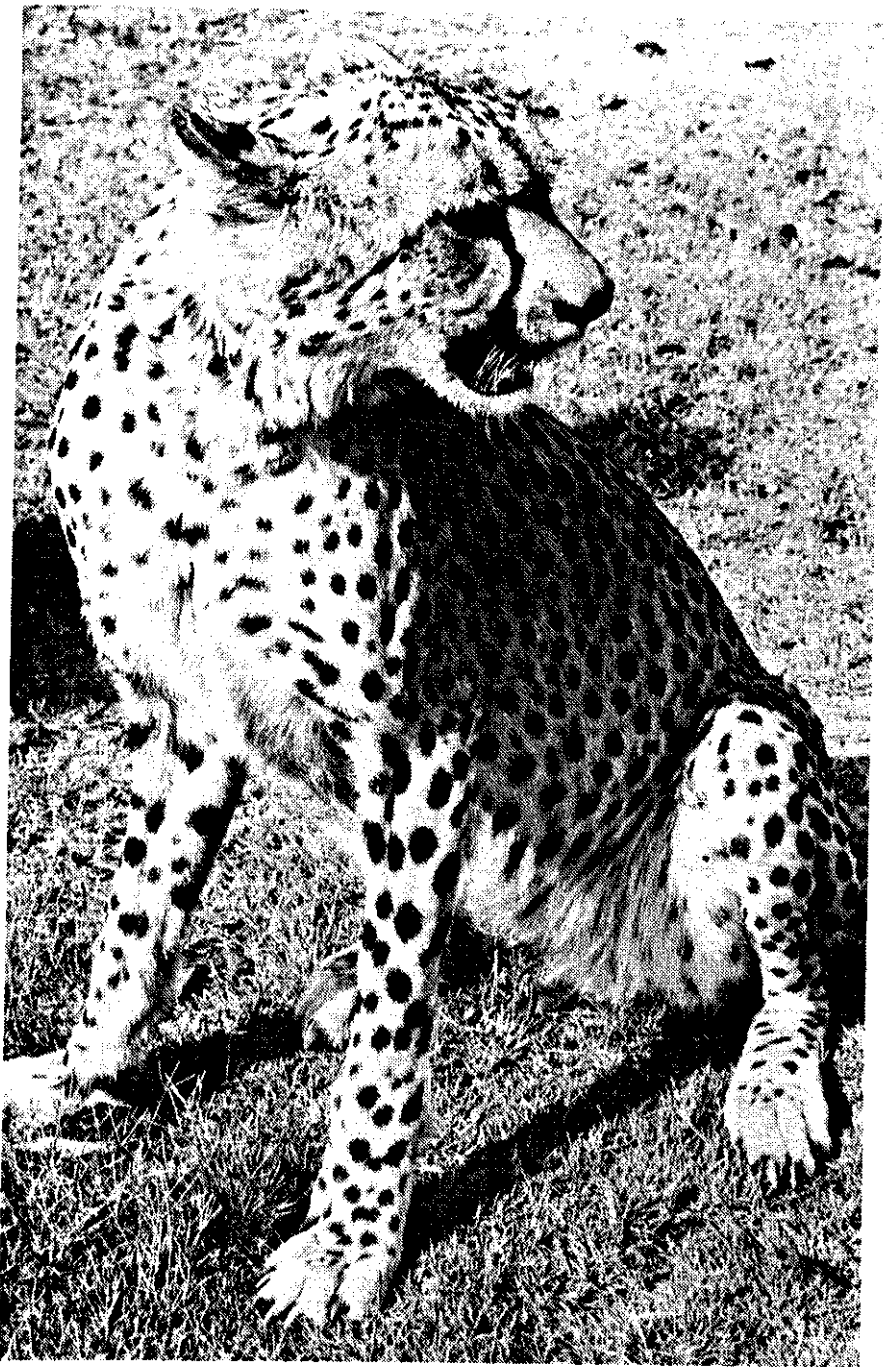
Many farmers consider cheetah to be vermin and instruct their staff to shoot on sight and to destroy the carcass. Sometimes a token permit is applied for and several animals destroyed, with only one trophy finally being surrendered to the state — a sad state of affairs when the probable world population of the species is taken into consideration.

However, things are looking up for the cheetah. The Department of National Parks, having realised that the system has been open to abuse, is tightening up on the policing and follow-up of permit applications.

Several control measures have been implemented to monitor the cheetah's status. Meanwhile ranchers have been reminded through their ICAs that there is a system through which cheetah may be legally shot, and stock-owners are being encouraged to submit permit applications.

The permit system may be revised in the future, and some kind of compensation for stock losses attributable to cheetah may also be introduced.

The cheetah is an endangered species, and



Cheetah are distinguishable from leopard by the black "tear marks" on their faces and by their solid single black spots.

if ever there was an animal needing protection, it is this mild-mannered and beautiful cat. Worldwide its numbers are declining, sometimes because of the fur trade (yes, some people do still buy cheetah-skin coats in spite of all that has been said and written), sometimes because of their supposed damage to domestic livestock.

With perhaps one-fifth of the world's cheetah population, Zimbabwe has — as with the black rhino — a choice: to look on as the species slides towards oblivion, or to reap the rewards of responsible conservation. ♪

No threat to humans

Though they may sometimes kill domestic animals, there are very few recorded cases of cheetah attacking humans. Compared with the leopard, the cheetah is relatively harmless even when wounded or cornered. Tame cheetah have been recorded from many eras and civilisations in Africa and Asia.