

CHEETAHS *To release or to not release*

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The Africat Foundation and the Cheetah Conservation Fund (south and east of Otjiwarongo respectively) regularly receive calls from farmers to collect cheetahs captured in trap cages. The farming community has a keen interest in what happens to these cats once they are removed from the area.

Farmland captures typically take place at so called "playtrees", along fence lines, or in the veld using live bait. It may be the result of a loss, as a preventative measure, or simply because cheetah activity was seen. Captures very rarely take place at a kraal and virtually never in the same time frame as an actual loss. Since cheetahs rarely return to a kill, the captured animals are seldom directly associated with a specific loss, as is more commonly the case with leopards.

Place and time of capture

Where and when a cheetah is captured is usually a good indication as to whether the actual cheetah that may have been causing livestock losses has been caught. A cheetah captured inside a kraal is more likely to be the problem than a cheetah captured at a playtree, because multiple individuals with overlapping home ranges, as well as transient youngsters, visit the playtrees. Cheetahs captured at playtrees are considered releasable, because this indiscriminate capture does not target specific conflict animals, but rather any cheetah passing through.

The time period between the loss and the capture is also important when determining whether the right predator has been caught. Most captures occur days or even weeks after a loss. Radio telemetry data collected over a nine year period has shown that cheetahs are virtually never found on the same farm from one week to the next. An exception to this rule is females with cubs under eight weeks old. Since home ranges overlap and individuals travel vast distances (the average cheetah home range is 1 500 km²) any significant time lapse between livestock loss and capture makes it highly unlikely that it is the culprit which has been caught.

Reason for capture

The circumstances under which a cat has been caught are also taken into consideration, including whether actual livestock or game losses have occurred, or if the capture is a preventative measure carried out in anticipation of losses. Cheetahs caught for the latter reason are considered releasable.

Cheetahs that take livestock may be categorised as either habitual or opportunistic livestock killers. Certain cheetahs may develop habitual livestock killing behaviour, where they will go as far as climbing into kraals to target livestock despite close proximity to humans or even the

presence of dogs in the kraal. Where suspected habitual livestock killers are identified (e.g. caught at the kraal) every effort is made to relocate these animals in non-livestock areas such as reserves. Failing this, they may well remain in captivity.

Other cheetahs have been recorded moving through calving herds or in close proximity to livestock and ignoring them. Opportunistic behaviour occurs when a predator takes livestock on occasion, but does not actively seek out livestock in preference to natural prey. Cheetahs caught taking game in game camps, although causing economic losses, are considered releasable, as they are taking natural prey.

Age and overall health

Cheetahs under the age of sixteen months are considered non-releasable without an adult, however following rehabilitation as adults, cheetahs that have been orphaned at an early age could be released into controlled situations such as reserves. Where a cheetah's age, dentition and physical condition are such that survival in the wild is no longer possible, it is considered to be non-releasable. Cheetahs that are habituated to or imprinted on humans are not considered suitable for farmland release, but would be considered for release into reserve situations.

Procedures for Release of Cheetahs Caught on Farms

Both CCF and Africat carry out full biomedical and health examinations on cheetahs before they are released, and all animals are marked with ear tags and/or transponders. Every effort is made to persuade farmers who have captured cheetahs to allow them to be released at the capture location. In cases where animals deemed to be releasable are removed from a farm, permission is obtained from the farmer for their release. No cheetahs are released onto private farmland without the permission of the landowner.

Farmers who allow the release of trapped cheetahs are provided with information including weight, age, ear tag numbers and general release locations. The names of farmers who permit the release of cheetahs are held in confidence, and neighbours are not notified of these releases. This allows farmers who support cheetah conservation to participate without incurring the animosity of neighbours with differing beliefs.

Living with predators is never going to be easy, but it can be done, as is demonstrated by many Namibian farmers. Removing cheetahs buys some time for the farmer and the cat, but ultimately, the key to human/predator conflict resolution lies in sound livestock and wildlife management.

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