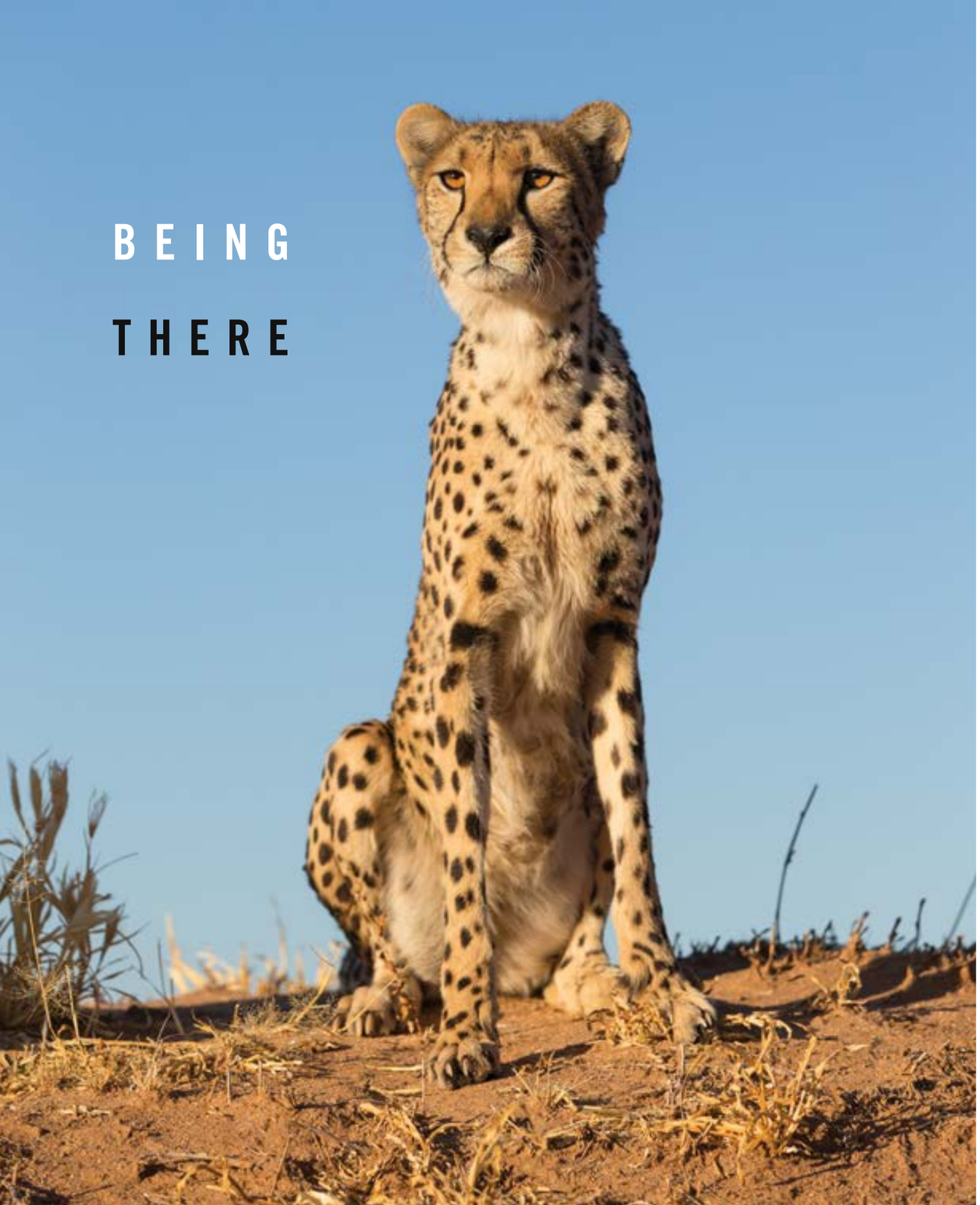
BEING THERE



As a working guest at the **Cheetah Conservation Fund** in Namibia, the author fulfills a dream and discovers she can also help save cheetahs from her home in California.

BY MARCIA SIVEK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUZI ESZTERHAS

IT WAS MID-FEBRUARY in Namibia and the early morning air was cool, refreshing, before the heat and humidity would set in. It felt like I had the compound to myself; I didn't see anyone else as I walked along the path past the cheetah enclosures toward the "hotspot," the outdoor communal dining area for staff, interns and working guests. The dawn sky glowed orange, purple and pink. I walked slowly, meditatively, taking in new bird songs, some melodic, some loud and obnoxious, but all exciting.

The path, I noticed, was flanked by wire fences. That's when reality set in: The fences are there to not only keep cheetahs in, but to keep leopards—which have been known to prey on cheetahs—out. My thoughts were suddenly disrupted by loud purring, like that of a very large house cat. There, right in front of me, was a cheetah rubbing his face on the opposite side of the fence. He plopped down on the ground with his head and back toward me, his fur sticking through the wire grid. He had no care that I was standing there with nothing but a fence between us. "Breathe, Marcia, breathe," I said to myself. It was my first close up encounter with a cheetah. Finally, I was where I wanted to be—at the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) in Otjiwarongo as a working guest.

I HAD NEVER THOUGHT of being a working guest for a conservation group before meeting Laurie Marker, DPhil (PhD), founder and director of CCF. We met at a Wildlife Conservation Network (WCN) Expo in San Francisco. WCN supports wildlife conservationists by helping them share their stories and build financial networks. Marker was speaking at the end of the day. I was torn between attending her lecture or one about elephants, another animal I'm passionate about protecting. My goal was to sit in on part of each talk, beginning with Marker's, but I became so engrossed in what she was saying, I never made it to the elephant lecture.

Marker told the audience that there are fewer than 8,000 cheetahs left in the wild (Namibia is home to more than half the population) and one of the greatest threats to their survival is human-wildlife conflict. The majority of wild cheetahs live outside of protected areas alongside human communities that farm livestock. To the farmers, livestock predation by cheetahs, as well as other large carnivores, is seen as a threat to their livelihoods and, historically, have reacted with lethal means. But CCF is working to change that perception and reduce the inclination by farmers to trap or shoot cheetahs.

Marker explained that CCF takes a holistic approach to cheetah conservation that involves

helping local communities better protect their livestock by implementing predator-friendly livestock and wildlife management techniques, including the use of guard dogs for non-lethal predator control. Since 1994 CCF has been breeding Kangal and Anatolian shepherds and has placed 650 of them on farms in Namibia. They are large, powerful canines, weighing as much as 145 pounds, and have a fierce bark that frightens off would-be predators. CCF places the dogs on farms when they are puppies so that they form a bond with their livestock at a young age. Ninety-two percent of the farmers who have participated in CCF's Livestock Guarding Dog Program have reported no loss or a significant decrease in livestock losses due to predation.

Guards dogs are just one component of CCF's holistic conservation approach that also includes a sanctuary for orphaned cheetahs; a model farm where local farmers can see predator-friendly practices firsthand; and a habitat restoration project that turns invasive thorn bush into high-heat, low-emission logs called "Bushblok," which can be used for home heating and cooking fires. They also have a world-class research facility with a veterinary clinic and genetics lab, an education center and a cheetah museum.

After Marker's hour-long presentation, I practically ran to the CCF booth to ask how I could help out. When Marker appeared, I bombarded her with a stream of questions, like "How can I help? What is Namibia like? How did you get involved with cheetahs?" She smiled and said, "You can join us in Namibia as a working guest and find out!" The seed was planted.

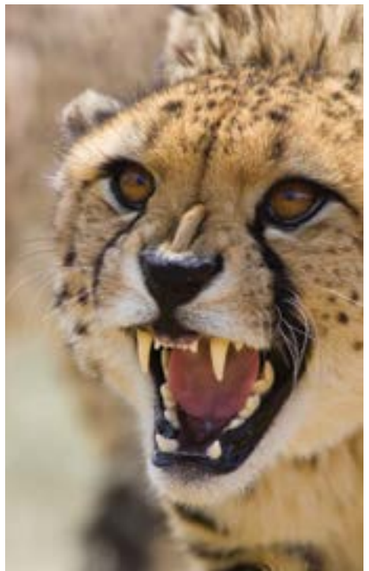
Left: Laurie Marker and a Livestock Guarding Dog staff member with an Anatolian shepherd protecting a herd of goats. Right: Adapted for speed, the cheetah *(Acinonyx jubatus)* can run up to 70 mph. Lower right: A cheetah at CCF hissing and displaying defensive behavior.

IN SEARCHING THE CCF WEBSITE for information about what a working guest actually is and what I would do if I became one, I found that CCF accepts a limited number of volunteers and working guests from all over the world with all kinds of backgrounds, expertise and skills—marketing, public relations, education, fundraising, administration, report writing and law. I was relieved when I read this because I was worried that I wouldn't have the right qualifications since I'm not an ecologist, biologist or veterinarian. With more self-confidence, I sent in my application and was accepted.

There is a fee to become a working guest that is determined by length of stay, but that fee is considered a donation to CCF, with a small portion going toward room and board. Working guests are housed in rondavels—little huts with a sleeping area and bathroom with shower—or in a dorm with other volunteers and interns. Meals are provided in the communal dining area.

MY FLIGHT TO NAMIBIA landed in the capital city, Windhoek. From there, it was a three-and-a-half-hour drive north to the CCF campus in Otjiwarongo. The last 22 miles were on a long, straight red dirt road that passed through vast stretches of farmland. I later learned that this area—approximately 100,000 acres surrounding CCF—is part of a conservancy known as the Greater Waterberg Landscape, where, for more that 25 years, CCF has worked with neighboring conservation communities and farmers to help local people reap economic benefits from managing the wildlife there.

I spent a little more than two weeks experiencing CCF, the cheetahs, the guard dogs, the people and the working farm. I kept busy from sunrise to sunset and did what I could wherever I was needed each day. Marker and the crew at CCF work long hours with an impressive and inspiring work ethic. At times I felt like the tasks I did were menial compared to theirs—walking the guard dogs, cutting up meat to feed the cheetahs, or cleaning the library—but Marker and the staff made me feel that as a working guest I was a vital part of the CCF ecosystem. Not all of my chores were mundane, though. I helped out with cheetah husbandry, feeding and observing the 34 cheetahs in rehabilitation. I also assisted Marker with writing a grant proposal for a Pathways Conference, which educates young African conservationists about human-wildlife conflict. I never tired of helping feed the ambassador cheetahs for the public viewings at the Visitor Center, where people can learn about cheetahs, how they hunt and eat, and how CCF ensures their cheetahs get adequate nutrition to thrive.



Each working guest experience at CCF is different, but it is guaranteed

that everyone leaves inspired, hopeful, and ready to share and apply what they have learned at CCF in their daily lives. I know I have. I now volunteer for CCF here in Northern California, planning local fundraising events for CCF where Marker is the guest speaker. The Art of Saving the Cheetah, an event I organized last December to celebrate International Cheetah Day, raised US$8,000.00 for the cheetahs.

My initial encounter with Marker at the WCN Expo so filled me with hope that I was inspired to create a podcast, "BeProvided Conservation Radio," that shares the stories of people like Marker—conservationists, artists and writers—who are doing good in the world. My goal with the podcast is to encourage people to get involved in conservation and show them how they can do it. Any action, even a small one, can make a difference.

During my last day at CCF, I interviewed Marker for my podcast. Our conversation took place on her porch with a view of the Waterberg Plateau and sounds of exotic birds in the background. At the end of our interview—excerpted below—I asked her what gave her hope, and I loved her response: "Hope is that volunteers can spread awareness and that people get involved to see that each and every one of us can do something to make the world better. Saving a species takes a lot of work. And being a volunteer can bring one's interests or expertise to help in the saving."

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Marcia Sivek: Tell us about your history and the history of CCF.

Laurie Marker: I started working with cheetahs in the early 1970s. I was working at Wildlife Safari in Oregon, one of the few places in the world breeding cheetahs. Nobody really knew anything about cheetahs at that time. They fascinated me, and I wanted to know everything there was to know. I talked with people [conservationists and cheetah researchers] everywhere, and kept hearing, "We've got to do something. Tell us what to do." So, I started coming to Namibia in the mid-70s. I did a research project here in 1977 with a captive-born cheetah from Oregon. Her name was Khayam.

Back then Namibia was called Southwest Africa. The country was in a state of war, trying to get its independence from South Africa. And there was conflict on the Angola border. So, there I was with a captive-born cheetah that I had hand raised, trying to find out if she could learn how to hunt, in a place where farmers thought cheetahs were vermin. They thought I was crazy; they were killing as many as 800-900 cheetahs a year.

I did teach Khayam how to hunt. But back in the US people were breeding cheetahs, thinking we could maybe put them back out in the wild, except nobody really knew what was going on in the wild. I came back to America with this story of people hating them and that we couldn't breed them well in captivity. Even today, the cheetah is not a self-sustaining population in captivity.

So, I came back saying somebody has got to do something to save the cheetah in the wild because people are killing them. I thought that somebody would do something. I call that the "they factor." "They" will do it. Well, who are "they"? The answer kept coming back like a boomerang, "Well, you're doing something."

I had moved by then from Oregon to Washington, DC, where I joined a research team at the Smithsonian and the National Zoo trying to figure out a way to help endangered species. When I joined that team I said, "I'm going to set up an organization and we're going to go save cheetahs." And I did. In 1990, at the time of Namibia's Independence, I set up the Cheetah Conservation Fund and then moved to Namibia.

MS: What drove you to create CCF in Namibia?

LM: I chose Namibia because I felt it had the best chance for cheetah survival, which is still true. The reason for that is we have a small human population. Throughout all of its range, about 80% of cheetah are found outside of protected areas. That puts them on farmland and in conflict with livestock farmers.

I felt that we had the best chance here to stabilize the population by working with the farmers and then trying to grow the population. In the last 28 plus years, that's what we've done. When I started, I went door to door to talk to the farmers. I wanted to know why they were killing cheetahs. I learned, not just about cheetahs, I asked them about their farming systems. I wanted to know how they worked their land. Livestock farms are huge, 10,000-30,000 acres. And they might have just 1,000 head of cattle.

What I found was that farmers oftentimes weren't protecting their livestock. Calves were being born out in the field and the farmers didn't know what took them. A calf might fall down an aardvark hole. A leopard could take it. It could die of disease. There was little management. So, going door to door and talking about livestock management allowed me to actually find out more about how the farmers were farming on their land.

Then I'd ask them, why are you having problems with the cheetah? Do you have problems with leopards or jackals? Do you have a herder with your small stock? Do you use guard dogs? Where's your wildlife?

Some of the farmers, especially the younger ones, actually started thinking that maybe killing the cheetahs or trapping them wasn't really the right thing to do. Maybe there were solutions. And some of these younger farmers started listening to the [solutions] that we had found and started putting them into practice, like having calving seasons and protecting calves for the first month of their lives because cheetahs would only catch calves that were less than one month old. If you know where your calves are, you can protect them. And then we brought in livestock guardian dogs in 1994. It was an experiment really to find out, could you protect your livestock? We started putting together all of those things and then asking the farmers, "If a cheetah is found in your backyard, and you're actually the most important person to the cheetah's survival, what needs to be done and how can we work together?" So the farmers basically laid out our programs in the first few years because they wanted to know more about livestock management. **WH**

Listen to the full interview with Laurie Marker at beprovidedconservationradio.libsyn.com. Visit cheetah.org to find out how you can support the Cheetah Conservation Fund.

Above: A mother with five-day-old cubs sleeping in their nest at Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya. Lower right: Seven-month-old cubs playing, Maasai Mara. Far right: A cheetah at CCF that was rescued from a trap on a livestock farm.