

A Future Worth Running Toward

Honorary Doctorate Speech

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President, distinguished faculty, honored guests, Cheetah Conservation Fund Board, Trustees, and staff, fellow graduates, and friends,

I accept this honorary doctorate with deep gratitude — and with a profound sense of responsibility.

Because this honor is not simply a reflection of the past. It is a call to the future.

More than forty years ago, when I began working in Namibia, the cheetah was in silent decline. Farmers viewed predators as adversaries. Habitat was shrinking. Science was still uncovering the genetic fragility of the species. Many believed extinction was inevitable.

But Namibia taught me something transformative: extinction is not inevitable when people choose collaboration over conflict.

Together with Namibian farmers, government leaders, and local communities, we built what became the Cheetah Conservation Fund — not as a rescue organization alone, but as a living laboratory for coexistence.

We proved that livestock guarding dogs could reduce predator conflict. We demonstrated that restoring bush-encroached land could revive ecosystems. We showed that science, when shared openly, could inform policy. And through Namibia's community conservancy model, we witnessed how giving local communities rights over wildlife creates economic resilience and ecological stewardship.

This was not charity. This was systems change.

And that is what the next era of leadership demands.

Because today, biodiversity loss is accelerating. Climate instability is reshaping landscapes. Illegal wildlife trafficking has become a sophisticated global enterprise. Ecosystems are collapsing faster than policies can respond.

Incremental change is no longer enough.

The work we began in Namibia expanded across Africa, into the Horn where we confront the illegal trade in live cheetah cubs. It extended to partnerships in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States to strengthen enforcement and genetic research. And it reached India, where cheetahs once extinct returned through international cooperation — a symbol that restoration is possible when nations act boldly together.

But let us be clear: species recovery is not just about animals.

It is about rethinking how humanity relates to land, to wildlife, and to each other.

To the graduates here today:

You are inheriting not a stable world, but a pivotal one.

You will determine whether sustainability is a slogan — or a structural reality. Whether development continues to degrade ecosystems — or regenerates them. Whether global cooperation fractures — or strengthens.

My generation fought to prove that conservation and economic development can coexist. Your generation must go further. You must redesign systems so that ecological resilience is embedded into finance, governance, agriculture, and technology.

You must think beyond borders.

The cheetah cannot survive in fenced islands. It requires connected landscapes. In the same way, humanity cannot thrive in isolated silos of thinking. Climate policy must connect with food systems. Biodiversity strategy must align with community rights. Technology must serve planetary health.

The future demands integration. And it demands courage.

There were moments in my journey when I was told my goals were unrealistic — that farmers would never change, that illegal trade was unstoppable, that international cooperation was too complex.

But bold vision is often dismissed before it is realized.

If we had accepted conventional limits, Namibia would not be home to the world's largest population of wild cheetahs. Community conservancies would not be a global model. And the return of cheetahs to India would still be a dream.

Progress belongs to those willing to imagine beyond current constraints.

So I ask you:

What system will you redesign?

What broken model will you challenge?

What future will you refuse to compromise?

Because the world does not need passive graduates. It needs architects of resilience.

My vision for the decades ahead is clear:

African conservation expertise leading global environmental policy.

Community conservancies evolving into climate adaptation hubs.

Young African scientists directing international research institutions.

Technological innovation dismantling wildlife trafficking networks.

Global partnerships replacing competition with shared stewardship.

Not because it is idealistic — but because it is necessary.

The cheetah runs with precision and purpose. It does not chase every movement on the horizon. It selects its path and commits fully.

Likewise, choose your pursuit carefully — and then pursue it with unwavering conviction.

Today, I accept this honor not as a culmination, but as momentum. The work continues. The responsibility grows. The opportunity expands.

Graduates, the future is not something you enter. It is something you build.

Build it boldly.

Build it collaboratively.

Build it with science as your compass and integrity as your foundation.

Because as long as cheetahs breathe life into Africa's wild horizons, we know that the future we're fighting for is still possible.

And when history looks back at this generation, let it say: they did not inherit crisis — they transformed it.

Thank you for this extraordinary honor. And congratulations to each of you. May you run toward a future worthy of your courage.

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#SaveTheCheetah