

CHEETAH SPOTS

Cheetah Conservation Fund Australia

| Autumn 2015

Cheetah Conservation Fund is 25 years old!

It was in 1990 that Dr Laurie Marker founded the Cheetah Conservation Fund in Otjiwarongo Namibia. From humble beginnings, CCF now employs more than a hundred people in Namibia alone, and features cottage industries such as a creamery and bush block manufacturing, as well as a working "cheetah-friendly farm, with more than a thousand head of cattle. CCF is home to a world class research facility, which includes a veterinary clinic and life technologies laboratory, which is the only fully equipped genetics lab in situ at a conservation facility in Africa. From this facility, CCF collaborates with scientists around the globe. It has developed best-practice techniques for storing sperm, tissues and blood samples in its genome resource bank, one of the largest for any endangered species. Cryopreservation methods continue to be studied and refined in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institute.



Beautiful Kyan, the queen of King Cheetahs

A visit to Monarto Open Range Zoo

Lucky Secretary of the Cheetah Conservation Fund Australia recently got treated like a V.I.P on her visit to Monarto. Read Kathleen Ager's story here.

On a cool Sunday morning, I was welcomed at the gates prior to opening time by cheetah keepers extraordinaires Michelle and Jaimee, and had the privilege of spending all day with them behind the scenes.

Among other exciting adventures, I experienced:



Australia's largest open range zoo

- Being the first non-zoo staff member or volunteer to interact with Kwatile ("regal princess"), an 18-month old cheetah currently being trained as an ambassador for interaction with the public. I didn't spook her at all, so, obviously, the training is successful!
- Visiting all the cheetahs in their behind the scenes enclosures, as well as seeing the current breeding male parading through "lover's lane".
- Being introduced and allowed to interact and stroke "Maureen", a rare black-footed wallaby with amazingly soft fur.
- Feeding the two beautiful fennec foxes in their enclosure (and they wag their tails when called, like delicate little dogs!)
- Receiving one of the remaining wrist bands used for the fund-raising event surrounding the last birth of cheetahs at Monarto Zoo: It reads: "**Y**esterday there were more cheetah than **T**oday. We need to **P**rotect our cheetah for **T**omorrow and **F**orever". Each highlighted initial represents the initial of one of those cubs names: Jana (Yesterday in Swahili), Hizi (Today), Kulinda (Protect), Kesho (Tomorrow), Milele (Forever).

Kathleen Ager with Maureen, the Black-footed Wallaby

Monarto is an amazing place, covering a full 1,000 hectares. The lion enclosure alone is 10 hectares, and would encompass the whole of Adelaide zoo, which has an area of 8 hectares. The walking tracks cover 10 kilometres, and you need to take the hop-on/hop-off bus to explore. Moreover, the zoo has an extra 500 hectares earmarked for development, possibly as a free-range reserve with tourist accommodation. If this is developed, Monarto would become the largest zoo in the Southern hemisphere! There are not very many exhibits, but those that are there are absolutely state of the art, and the best animal exhibits I have ever seen.

As for cheetahs, of which Monarto currently holds seven, each has a couple of acres to roam in. As Monarto is a cheetah breeding facility, there is a "lover's lane". (In order to breed successfully, choosy female cheetahs need to see their prospective mates parading on a "catwalk".)



The past couple of years have been traumatic for the cheetahs and their keepers. There were three male ambassador cheetahs at Monarto, hand-raised by Michelle and other staff after their mother was too ill to care for them after their birth in 2004. Two passed away last year, and the remaining sibling, Skukuza, did not cope well with his bereavement and has to be retired from his role as ambassador, due to becoming moody and unpredictable (although he purred when I fed and stroked him through the bars of his enclosure). Two male siblings were imported from the Netherlands last year for breeding purposes. Sadly and inexplicably the dominant male was found injured and in shock and died before the vet could attend. The circumstances of his death remain unexplained as there were no witnesses. The remaining Dutch male, Saadani, is rather timid, and although the girls are interested, he just seems to be spooked by their advances. So this is a set-back for the breeding programme, particularly unfortunate since Monarto has a female king cheetah (Kyan) on loan from Dubbo Zoo for breeding purposes. For the cheetah keepers, but particularly for Michelle who hand reared her, the recent loss of Tokoloshe, sister to the three ambassadors, was a very hard blow, and she has composed a moving tribute for her favourite cheetah that you can read on page 4.



Michelle, with Kwatile.



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Tokoloshe's pawprints

A litter of three was born at Monarto Open Range Zoo in 2003, the first in the region in fifteen years, a testimony to Monarto's good breeding practices, and their cheetahs excellent genetics. These three cubs were Nakula, Inkosana and Kaidi.

The following year, on September 11 2004, eight cubs were born to cheetah Lula. Two died at day seven with Lula developing a huge ulcer under her tail and becoming very sick, which meant the remaining six cubs needed to be pulled for raising. Because of their good lineage, it was decided to send the three females off for breeding and to keep the three males as Ambassador Cats (using them for breeding if they were recommended). This began the Meet the Cheetah Tours which proved to be hugely successful for nine years raising enormous awareness and tens of thousands of dollars for conservation.

Tokoloshe was one of this litter. I was the Primary cheetah keeper back then and headed the hand-raising, a huge task. Toko was the largest of all the six and her first weight was 666 grams. Because of this number, our at the time South African Director Chris Hannocks said she should be named Tokoloshe, after a mischievous mythical devil. As much as I adore each and every cheetah and am not one for favourites, Toko and I clicked right from the beginning of her little life. She was hilarious as a cub, drinking from the bowl before anyone else and bouncing and playing before anyone else too. When Toko's two sisters went to Australia Zoo at just four months old, Toko was left with her three brothers to have fun. Toko eventually got sent to Perth Zoo on loan for four years before returning back to us as a breeding female. One of my most memorable times was flying to Perth with Toko and spending the week with her. If it were possible, she and I developed a stronger bond than ever, so much so she really fretted when I left and, I have to say, so did I. She did however return home to Monarto, and then we could focus on trying to breed from her. Sadly over the years there were plenty of matings from different males, but Toko never took - this is a major problem with cheetah and the lack of breeding worldwide.

Toko was the only one of the cheetah that would allow my daughters to visit without seeing them as prey. Even on the day before she was sadly euthanized, she allowed my girls and me to sit with her as she madly rubbed against the fence. Simple words cannot describe the loss I feel. Toko's kidneys began to fail at the end of 2014 but we were able to keep her functioning and happy with specialised drugs and fluids. We knew it was time when the bloods the vet would regularly take showed a huge spike in her urea levels. She was given a drug that would pep her up for a couple of days while we said our goodbyes. That day, she was amazing - she just wanted to go out to exhibit thinking she was just fine. The whole process went smoothly and she didn't suffer at all. My darling Tokoloshe will be in my heart always, her incredible spirit and strength will always be with me also. I feel so incredibly privileged to share a bond with so many amazing cheetah. I will miss Tok always.

Michelle

