

Champion of cheetahs



Dr Laurie Marker with one of her young charges

Meet the lady who has dedicated her life to saving one of the world's most remarkable, mysterious and most endangered big cats in Africa

By Katharine Wootton

You may think being the fastest land animal on Earth, capable of reaching speeds of 70mph in three seconds, might put you in a pretty lofty position. But life for the speedy cheetah is far from plain sailing, as Dr Laurie Marker has discovered over the last 46 years. Having spent a childhood surrounded by animals, in 1974 Laurie was introduced to her first ever cheetah while working at Wildlife Safari in Oregon, in the US.

"I was just fascinated by the cheetah and wanted to know everything about them, only to discover people knew very little," she says. From there, Laurie began a mission to change that, culminating in setting up her own charity, the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), dedicated to understanding these mysterious animals so to better



protect them for the future. After all, the cheetah has long been under threat with populations now below 7,500 worldwide.

Part of the problem has been exactly that lack of knowledge about them - something that's not helped by the fact cheetahs are secretive and speedy, making counting, tracking and, in turn, understanding them, a pretty tall order. Nevertheless, Laurie has pioneered ground-breaking research to monitor their behaviour and the different threats facing them.

For a start, cheetahs, like all cats, need their territory to roam in, and for them this patch needs to be vast. As one of the top predators, the cheetah also needs an adequate supply of suitable prey. However, over the years, as the human population has boomed, cheetahs have been driven out of their normal habitats of sprawling landscapes filled with good dinner options, leaving them homeless, hungry and often living right on top of humans. This, of course, only ends badly as cheetahs have no option but to prey on the nearby livestock of some of the poorest farmers. As a result, many farmers shoot the cheetahs. The problem has been so bad that farmers in Namibia wiped out about 10,000 of them in the Eighties.

Laurie, however, has spent decades trying to find solutions, introducing training programmes that help farmers

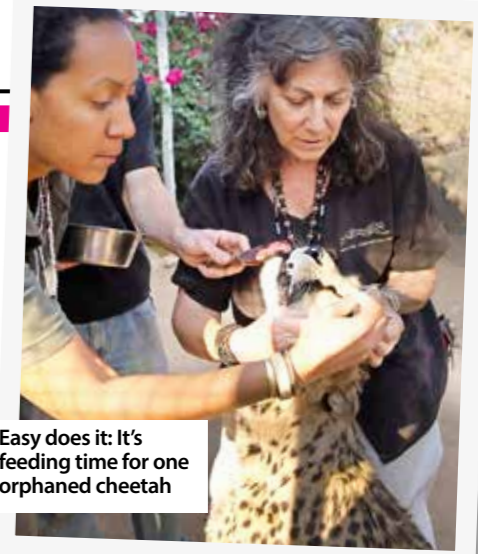
find other ways of protecting their livestock, without killing cheetahs. One of the most successful projects has been placing guard dogs on farms so that when a cheetah approaches, the dog scares them away. Already farmers using dogs have reported a 70-100 per cent decline in the numbers of livestock lost, which has, in turn, saved cheetah lives.

In the meantime, Laurie has also been working with governments to manage land in a better way so that natural wildlife can flourish, meaning cheetahs have not only the space but also the food they need, so they don't have to hunt livestock.

As well as working with farmers, Laurie and her team have also educated 650,000 schoolchildren in Namibia, so future generations will better understand how to live in harmony with cheetahs. "We have to recognise that we as humans are the problem behind the cheetah's decline, but we are also the solution, too," Laurie says.

She also helps many individual cases through reserves that care for several dozen orphaned cheetah cubs. These orphans, which must be bottle-fed, will have a home for life at the CCF's reserves because their necessary dependency on humans means it's not safe for them to return to the wild. Nevertheless, Laurie's team study these cheetahs to better understand their biology - information

DID YOU KNOW...?
Female cheetahs either live alone or only with their young, while male cheetahs live in small family groups of two to three brothers called a coalition



Easy does it: It's feeding time for one orphaned cheetah

they then share with cheetah breeding programmes at zoos around the world. While all this work has already made a huge difference, Laurie knows there will be new challenges ahead. All cheetahs come from an incredibly small gene pool, meaning they lack the genetic diversity needed to cope well with disease or climate change, something which also threatens to make the arid lands where many live inhospitable in the future.

'Humans are the problem behind their decline, but we are also the solution, too'

"The more I've learned about cheetahs, the more I've come to appreciate how beautiful and special they are," says Laurie. "I've also learned that, as key predators, by helping save the cheetah, we'll help many other species survive, too."

■ If you'd like to find out more about the Cheetah Conservation Fund visit cheetah.org.uk and if you'd like to make a donation visit www.cheetah.org.uk/donate-2



From left, some of the puppies raised to help save cheetah lives, a group of visiting youngsters with Dr Laurie Marker and right the Cheetah Research and Education Centre in Namibia



PICS: CCF MEDIA, JACO MARK; PUPPY PICTURE: ISABELLE GROU/CHEETAH CONSERVATION FUND