



CCF Education officer Joe-Brown Kambombo holds a cat in preparation for a rabies vaccination by locum veterinarian Dr Aino Matheus.

Cheetah Conservation Fund protects wildlife, dogs and people through **RABIES VACCINATIONS**

By Ana Basto, Anahi Hidalgo, Laurie Marker, De'Andre Delie, Anne Schmidt-Küntzel

Rabies is a major global health threat, responsible for an estimated 70,000 human fatalities annually, with the highest toll in Asia and Africa. In Namibia, rabies presents significant challenges not only to public health but also to wildlife conservation. The virus is transmitted in saliva and carnivores are especially vulnerable to contracting it and passing it on to each other and humans through bites. Rabies is virtually 100% fatal for any human or animal that contracts it.

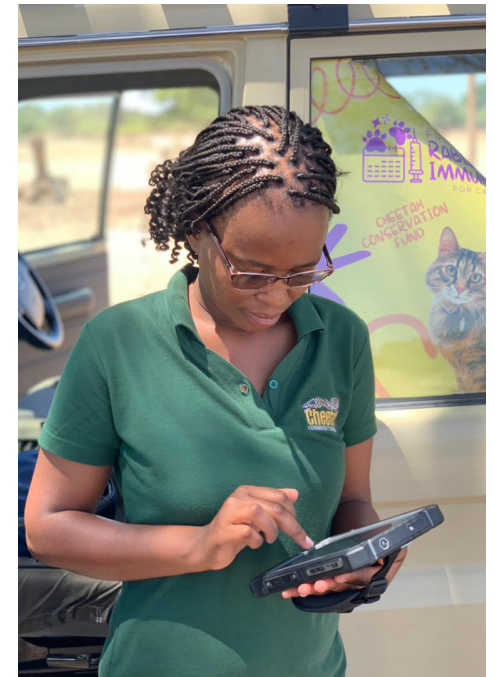
This deadly disease can only be fought through vaccination: animals that have been vaccinated are safe from contracting and transmitting rabies. Since wild animals cannot easily be vaccinated, the most effective strategy to protect wild carnivores and humans is to vaccinate domestic carnivores – cats and dogs. The Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) has therefore embarked on an ambitious initiative to combat this deadly virus through a comprehensive rabies vaccination programme aimed at domestic cats and dogs in remote rural areas.

Initiated in 2019, CCF's rabies vaccination programme was established in four communal conservancies in the Greater Waterberg Landscape – Ozonahi, Otjituuu, African Wild Dog and Okamatapati. The programme is generously supported by the Foundation for Human Rabies Education and Eradication (FHREE). The area was chosen for its indigenous wildlife, including the endangered cheetah and African wild dog. By vaccinating domestic dogs and cats, CCF aims to simultaneously reduce the risk of rabies transmission to wildlife and to humans – saving the lives of both.

Reaching communities in the Greater Waterberg

Before the start of each vaccination trip, our team re-engages with the relevant conservancy chairperson to discuss which areas we intend to cover. The chairperson then informs the community through word of mouth, radio broadcasts and public gatherings. That way all community members know exactly when and where the vaccinations will take place, setting the stage for a smooth and efficient campaign (see text box on page 52).

During each vaccination trip our mobile veterinary team spends up to ten days in the field, camping on communal land in proximity to a homestead. This allows us to reach even the most isolated communities. In 2023, CCF reached 152 villages in these four conservancies and vaccinated over 3,000 animals during that year.



CCF Community Officer Veisy Kasaona enters data into the GARC app.



KEY STEPS WHEN CONDUCTING A RABIES VACCINATION CAMPAIGN

Set-up and vaccination

- Arrive at the respective village or homestead
- Set up the vaccination station
- Explain the vaccination process to the pet owners or caretakers
- Obtain informed consent
- Employ experienced techniques for physical restraint and vaccination to ensure safety for both animals and humans involved (not all dogs and cats are used to being touched)
- Fill out vaccination cards for each animal receiving the vaccine

Data collection and documentation

- Record all data in the GARC (Global Alliance for Rabies Control) app
- Compile a detailed report of the vaccination campaign
- Share vaccination data with government officials

Post-vaccination cleanup and review

- Clean and disinfect vehicles and equipment to minimise disease transmission risk
- Log disposable and medicine usage, place orders to restock if needed
- Store equipment neatly to maintain integrity
- File records
- Rest and start planning the next vaccination trip, which often begins less than a week after returning.

CCF Veterinary Technician Johanna Lukas vaccinates a dog in the Eastern Communal Conservancies of the Greater Waterberg Landscape.

Strategic collaboration for widespread impact

Recognising the scale of the rabies threat, CCF has cultivated partnerships with various stakeholders, including state veterinarians, local authorities and community leaders. Moreover, CCF is integrating its activities with national and global health strategies to align with the "Zero by 30" global strategic plan, which aims to eliminate human deaths from dog-mediated rabies by 2030. In 2024, we presented our work at the Namibian National Rabies Planning and Review Meeting and Workshop.

Since its inception, the programme has achieved significant milestones, including the vaccination of thousands of animals annually. Our efforts were briefly hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic but have since resumed with renewed vigour. In 2024, we were able to shift our focus toward more remote areas of the four conservancies, as the Okakarara State Veterinary Office began administering rabies vaccines to dogs and cats in densely populated areas close to their facilities. This shift means that CCF may vaccinate fewer cats and dogs than in previous years, but our team and the state veterinarian will jointly reach more communities and more animals in our target region.

Looking ahead, CCF plans to expand the scope of the vaccination efforts if we are able to secure more funding and resources for this programme. Our team is currently exploring the use of oral rabies vaccines for jackals and other wild carnivores that could potentially increase the reach and efficacy of the programme.

Education is a cornerstone of CCF's vaccination strategy

Vaccination programmes do not work without extensive community outreach efforts to raise awareness about rabies symptoms, transmission and prevention. CCF translates educational materials into local languages and distributes them during vaccination drives, complemented by education sessions that teach community members how to recognise and respond to potential rabies cases in animals.

CCF's rabies vaccination initiative in Namibia exemplifies a proactive and holistic approach to disease control that integrates public health, animal welfare and nature conservation. With continued support and collaboration, this programme not only aims to curb the immediate threat of rabies but also to sustain long-term health and safety of Namibia's communities and wildlife populations.

People around the world can help to extend our reach in rabies education. World Rabies Day on 28 September is recognised globally as a day to raise awareness about the prevention of rabies and to celebrate the efforts to stop the spread of the disease. You can participate by sharing information on rabies with your family and friends, or by finding out if you can help with vaccination campaigns where you live and by getting your own pets vaccinated. 🐾



Domestic cats and dogs from the Eastern Communal Conservancies of the Greater Waterberg Landscape who were vaccinated during the CCF rabies campaign.