

A close-up photograph of a cheetah's face, showing its distinctive black stripes and spots on its light-colored fur. The cheetah's eyes are a striking orange-brown color, and its black nose is prominent in the center. The background is a soft, out-of-focus pattern of the cheetah's fur.

CHEETAH CONSERVATION:

What's Working?

What's Not?

By Sylvia Lin
Compliments of *Nikela*



Part Two

This is a follow up eReport to “***Cheetah Conservation: What’s Really Happening***”* where Sylvia explored many questions... and came up with a few answers... and more questions.

In this eReport she explores captive breeding as a viable option to assure the survival of the cheetah. What she finds may surprise you?

This is provided in good faith to share our journey of discovery and does in no way claim to be all inclusive. Additional information is always welcome.

* Click <http://bit.ly/1BKKUiv> to read Part I

It is brought to you compliments of Nikela.



Commercialization.

In the age of commercialization, everything has a price.

We pay for a premium viewpoint to watch sunset, a decent education, or—if you're rich enough—invest in a country to become its permanent resident.

Even iconic and beloved cheetahs have a price tag when they are bred in captive facilities and sold to zoos and private buyers all over the world. As with any commercial production, the primary drive behind the wildlife industry in most cases is profit.

However, many captive centers would disagree. Despite the fact that few captive-bred cheetahs have been released into the wild over the years, many cheetah breeders claim what they do have conservation value. According to them, breeding cheetahs in captivity is essential in preserving the gene pool of cheetahs, so these cheetahs could be re-introduced into the wild in case of the extinction of wild cheetahs.



However, is this true?

Taking the condition of captive cheetahs into account, one could quickly grow suspicious of the claim, mainly because of the difficulties to breed cheetahs in captivity and these cheetahs' inability to survive in the wild.

Breeding cheetahs has never been easy.

Zoos in North America have been trying to breed cheetahs ever since the passage of the endangered species act in 1973, and their tireless attempt has gone on for decades without much success. In Africa, save for a few captive facilities that seem to master the technique of cheetah breeding, cheetahs don't breed well in captivity either. There are multiple causes for the difficulty to breed cheetahs in captivity including the chronic stress captive cheetah suffer and their distinct breeding habits that are difficult to replicate in captive environment.

Besides, captive cheetahs are especially prone to several diseases. For example, gastritis, which is seldom found in wild cheetahs, is diagnosed in over 95% of captive cheetahs in South Africa and North America.

The difficulty to breed and the prevalence of diseases in captive cheetahs contradict the assertion that these captive cheetahs help to “preserve the gene pool”, since these unhealthy animals can hardly sustain their own population. Often the captive facilities even need to obtain cheetahs from wild sources for fresh gene. Therefore, a more likely prediction in case of the extinction of wild cheetahs would be that many of these populations of captive cheetahs would simply die off soon.





If they succeed.

Still, some may argue, if these captive facilities succeed in breeding cheetahs, won't that be a tremendous aid in cheetah conservation?

Unfortunately, it's not likely...

ONE: Most captive cheetahs are simply too tamed to be released.

TWO: Captive-bred cheetahs are not suited to survive in the wild.

Genetics.

This is partly due to the lack of natural evolutionary pressure in captivity. As most needs of cheetahs are catered to in captive facilities, even cheetahs that are not vigilant to threats or bad at hunting survive. It has also been observed that particularly vigilant cheetahs do not breed in captivity. As a result, weak, tamed cheetahs get to breed and pass on their gene, eventually lead to a captive population that is unfit for survival in the wild.

Artificial selection.

Adding on top of the lack of natural selection, cheetahs in captivity often face intended artificial selection for certain coat pattern. For instance, captive centers often try to breed for king cheetahs even if it requires generations of inbreeding, because wealthy buyers in Middle East or zoos are willing to pay much higher price for king cheetahs. As the focus of breeding is shifted to beautiful coat pattern and away from how fit these cheetahs are, it becomes even less probable for them to survive in the wild.





If these captivated-born cheetahs breed with wild cheetahs, they will only pass undesirable gene and traits to the wild cheetahs and endanger their survival.

Good – Bad News.

Perhaps fortunately, the chance of these captive genes being passed to the wild cheetahs is slim because captive cheetahs don't usually do well in the wild. Having spent their entire life before release in cages, they do not possess the knowledge essential to survival in the wild. One of the mistakes they often make when trying to feed themselves is that they pick the wrong preys, such as rhino and wildebeest that are far too large for them to kill. As a result, they often injure or kill themselves in the process. Moreover, they sometimes fail to identify threat in their natural environment like lions and hyena, which is a mistake that could put their own lives at stake.

All these not only make it nearly impossible for captive-born cheetahs to survive in the wild, but also make the attempt to release



them very expensive as they often injure themselves and require veterinary care. Also the reserves that take them in may have to sacrifice on other big games like lions since captive-born cheetahs do not know how to co-exist with them. In short, it's extremely unrealistic to release captive cheetahs as a way of cheetah conservation.

Surprising conclusion.

It's clear that the practice of captive-breeding cheetahs have minimal conservation value, unless our aim is to breed tamed, pretty cheetahs for display. Just like the way tea sellers label the caffeine in green tea can "burn your fat", "conservation" by breeding cheetah is just a marketing strategy created for tourists who do not see the whole picture of wildlife conservation. Believing them, the loss of wild cheetahs could be the real cost we need to pay.

For a problem as massive and complicated, the solution to the endangerer statue of cheetahs may be surprisingly straight-forward.



focus on the wild cheetahs. In the scholarly paper “*Extrinsic Factors Significantly Affect Patterns of Diseases in Free-Ranging and Captive Cheetah Population*”, Linda Munson et al. stated that since cheetahs do not adapt well to captive environment, “conservation strategies should focus on preserving habitat” so wild cheetahs could “flourish.”

Wild Cheetahs.

Wild cheetahs should be the primary focus of conservation since releasing captive cheetahs to the wild is unrealistic even if the breeders truly care about conservation, and are not profit-orientated as the cases often are.

Although the preservation of cheetah habitat has proven to be another difficult task with people's insatiable demand of land, there are certain strategies that would enable conservationists to work around cheetahs' diminished habitat. For example, both the Guarding Dog Program and the managed metapopulation approach in Africa have enjoyed success in cheetah conservation as the former reduce

human-cheetah conflict, and the latter enables cheetahs to thrive even on smaller pieces of land.

These various programs give new hope to the endangered cheetahs in Africa: a hope that does not lie within the cages where tourist could pet the tamed big cats, but with the struggling yet resilient wild cheetahs that still roam the African continent like they do a century ago, albeit in much smaller number.

The wild cheetahs are still fighting, and maybe this is the time for us to, in the right way, really fight for them.





Sources:

Extrinsic Factors Significantly Affect Patterns of Diseases in Free-Ranging and Captive Cheetah Population, Linda Munson et al.

The *Cheetah Conservation Fund*, 2014 Annual Progress Report.

In all, several experts were consulted and studies researched. As it is not our purpose to point fingers, but to continue our journey of understanding, some remain unnamed.

This does not claim to be an all-inclusive eReport, but rather a work in progress, exploring Cheetah Conservation and striving to identify those who truly preserve this iconic beauty and its habitat best, now and for future generations.



Want to help?

Send us any information about Cheetahs you find

Send it to info@Nikela.org

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