

A close-up photograph of a cheetah's face, showing its distinctive spotted fur, a focused yellow eye, and its mouth slightly open with a pink tongue. The background is a soft-focus savanna landscape with green grass and a blurred horizon.

CHEETAH CONSERVATION: *What's Really Happening?*

By Sylvia Lin

Compliments of *Nikela*



In The Name of Conservation: The Truth behind the Falling Numbers

This eReport is not all encompassing.

It may raise more questions than it answers.

Sylvia Lin is one of our volunteers who loves Cheetahs.

This eReport comprises her findings as she tries to understand what is happening to Cheetahs breed in captivity in Africa.

It is brought to you compliments of Nikela.



Cheetah.

What image does this word evoke in you?

The sun-beaten, golden savannahs in Africa, the beautifully dotted, streamline body that blurs in its full speed chase of the prey, or the ancient gaze with black tear stripes running down from the corners of their eyes?

Even though cheetahs are not one of the big five, they are an important symbol of Africa. Charmed by their unique pattern and effortless elegance, many people who have never seen a cheetah in their life have a special place for the legendary animals in their hearts.

Yet the number of cheetahs in the wild is falling; over-hunting and habitat loss have drastically diminished their number, and the once over 100,000 population were brought down to less than 10,000 in the past century. With the steady downward trend in their number, many worry that cheetahs would soon become extinct.



You may ask, how about all those conservation effort and breeding programs? Shouldn't the decline in the number of cheetah be halted a long time ago, with so many people trying to save them?

These were my questions, too. This is the starting point of my investigation as I tried to find out what goes wrong with the whole conservation process that makes the attempt to protect cheetahs so futile.

As I looked closely at all the activities bustling around the word "conservation" in Africa, I was startled by a bewildering and disturbing picture that seems to bear little relation to the word itself. Despite the hard work by honest organizations or individuals who truly care about cheetahs, their achievements seem fragile against human greed, whether it's from corrupt politicians or indifferent businessmen who want to make more than a few bucks from the already endangered animal.



Under all the threats, the situation of cheetah conservation looks rather like a water bucket with holes in it. To keep the bucket full, while there has to be water pouring into the bucket, the holes on the bucket also need to be minimized. However, if the analogy were to fit the current situation, it would look like a tiny stream of water is dripping into the bucket while gigantic holes are letting out spouts of it.



Design by
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I was at first overwhelmed, and then scared.

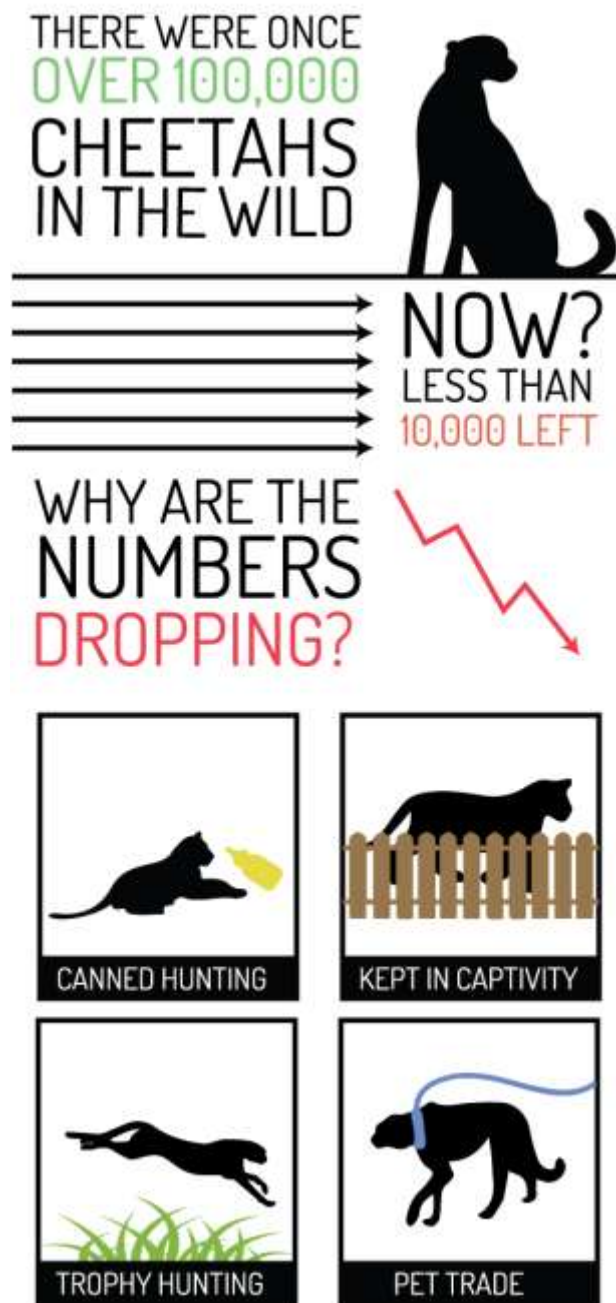
Because there is not much water left in the bucket.



Following the analogy, the first problem is with the water that flows into the bucket: the cheetahs that were released back into the wild. It's not as if Africa is short of these breeding programs. In fact, the success in breeding cheetahs in recent years has led to the increased number of cheetah in captivity. For South Africa alone, there are about 515 cheetahs in captivity, according to the Cheetah



Studbook. At the first glimpse this may seem a good news. However, the number of cheetahs in the wild continues to fall despite the rise. Why? Because most captivity-bred cheetahs are not being released into the wild.



Infographic by
Nikela Volunteer
Joyce Chen



There are several places they could be sent to:



Canned Hunting

The most unfortunate place a captivated cheetah could end up with is probably a canned hunting site. The highly controversial practice is basically done by putting the game species into a fenced area so they would have no chance of escaping the hunters. While lions are the most common big cat used in canned hunting, cheetahs are also the victims.

The source of these big cats often come from the so-called “cuddle farms”, where well-meaning but uninformed tourists could pay a certain amount of money to cuddle and bottle feed the adorable cubs. There are more than 160 farms that breed big cats in South Africa and they are highly unregulated. While the operators of the farms would claim the tourists are taking care of “orphaned” cubs that



would one day be released, the cubs usually end up being killed and made into trophies once they are no longer cute and cuddly.



Kept in captivity

There are about 90 cheetahs being exported to zoos per year. There are also many captivity-bred cheetahs that are simply kept at the breeding site and never released, because many of these cheetahs born were simply used to replenish the captivated population. The breeders often claim that since it is very hard to find suitable site to release the cheetahs, they are breeding the cheetah for education purposes or sustaining the gene pool, so they may be re-introduced to the wild in case cheetahs in the wild become extinct.

However, as very little regulation for these cheetah-breeding sites is in place, there is no way to tell if a site is



breeding cheetahs for educational or commercial purpose, and the breeders could easily neglect the welfare of cheetahs or other animal without consequences. Furthermore, the claim that it is essential to sustain the gene pool of cheetahs by breeding seems ironic and perverse as little is being done for wild cheetahs in Africa.

Now it comes to the holes on the bucket, where “gigantic” isn’t exactly an exaggeration:



Trophy Hunting

In comparison to the well-known and prevalent poaching in Africa, few people seem to be aware that hunting cheetahs is still legal in some African countries. In Namibia, one of the biggest cheetah trophy exporters of Africa, 1219 cheetah trophies were exported from 2002 to 2012. With only about 3000 Cheetahs left in Namibia, in which only 600-800 are grown male, which are



supposedly the only legal target for hunters, the yearly hunting rate of 116 cheetahs is in no way sustainable. As if this is not alarming enough, CITES actually allows a quota of 150 cheetah trophies to be exported from Namibia per year. As unbelievable as it seems, this is clearly a legal permit for cheetahs to be hunted into extinction in Namibia.



Pet Trade

The booming pet trade in the Middle East is taking a high toll on cheetahs in Africa. Perhaps not surprisingly, owning cheetahs as pets has been equalized with high status and is so popular that live cheetahs can even be found online. Overall, it's estimated that 118 live cheetahs were involved in the illegal trade from 2012-2013 alone. Perhaps the most infuriating aspect of the illegal pet trade is the staggering death toll; as high as 50% to 70%



of cheetah cubs die on their way through the war-torn regions of Africa before even making their entry to the Middle East. Even though it's supposed these cubs were snatched from the wild and many of them probably were, one may wonder if the relatively large number of captivated-bred cheetahs could also supply the industry.



Of Most Concern

Maybe the most concerning of all facts is that the African governments seem to have little concern for its wild animals. It may seem understandable when it is not a poor country's priority to protect their animals, especially when



the hunting industry is a lucrative business. For example, in South Africa alone, hunters bring in 100 million European dollars per year.

However, as the numbers of cheetahs bred and traded increase, the little regulation on the governments' part could be a nightmare for cheetah conservation. Plus the existing poaching, illegal trading and flawed laws, it seems that cheetahs don't stand a chance against extinction.

Even though all I've got are pieces to a large and probably not very beautiful puzzle, there are plenty of reasons to worry.

As captivated cheetahs are being bred and traded and exported to the world, wild cheetahs in Africa are gradually—or maybe not so gradually—being pushed to the brink of extinction.

And I wonder how the sun-beaten, golden savannah would look like without cheetahs?



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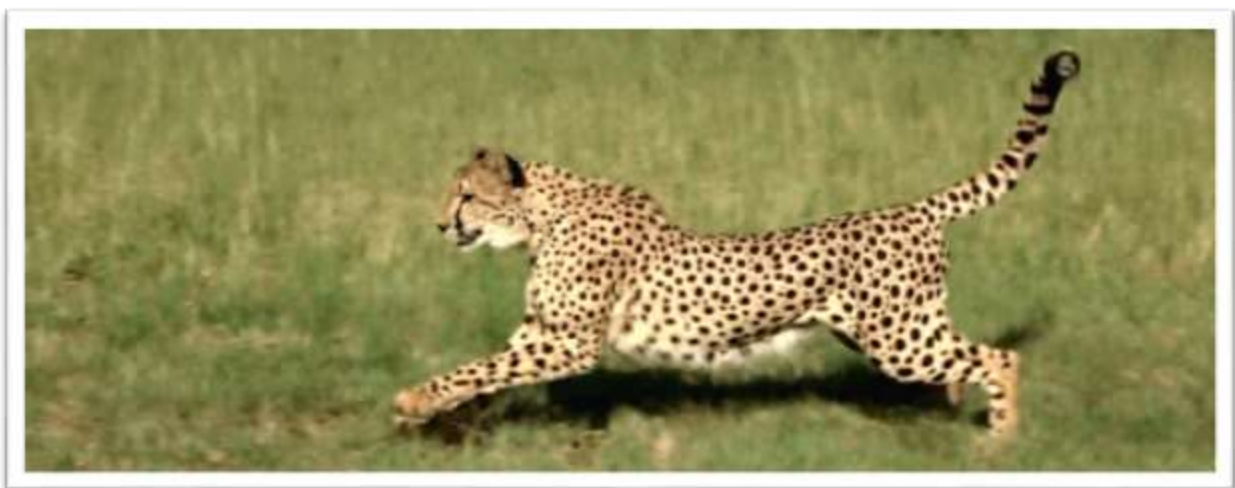
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TWO:

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info@Nikela.org

THREE:

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