

The disappearing cheetah – can Namibia help halt the decline?

Professor Keith Somerville



Mother cheetah with two cubs in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tanzania. © Keith Somerville

There are about [7,100 wild cheetahs](#) left in the world in scattered populations in Africa and one, very small and possibly unviable population in Iran. The speed king of the cat family is fast disappearing and now only inhabits [nine per cent](#) of its former range across Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia.

In much of its remaining range it is under threat or surviving in small populations that are vulnerable to human pressure on habitats, declines in prey numbers, the hostility of livestock farmers in some areas, the illegal wildlife trade (skins and cubs captured in the wild). And in protected areas often fenced off, the threat from more powerful, competing predators like lions, leopards and hyenas.

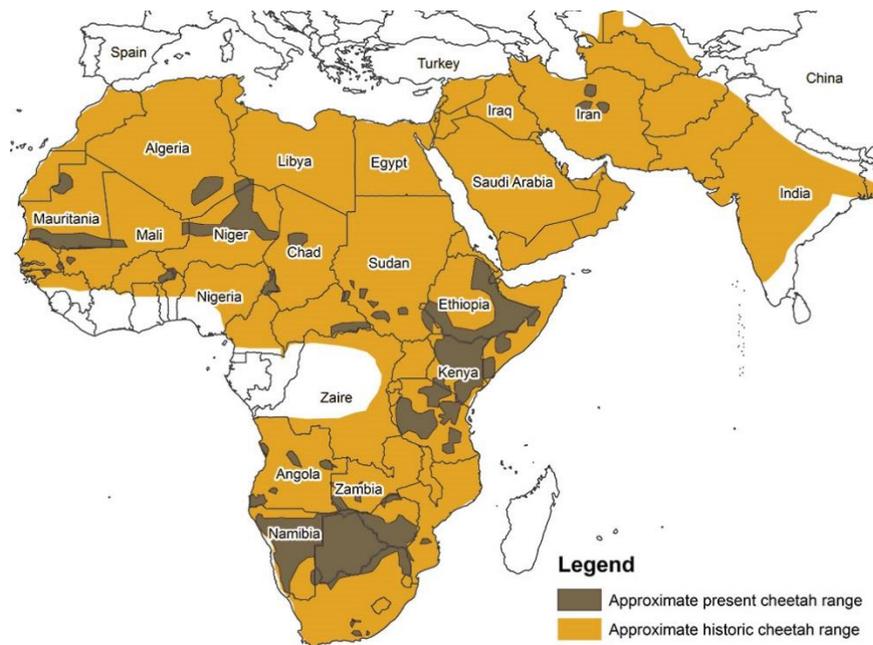
Recent reports by conservation group [Panthera](#), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the in-depth study by [Sarah Durant et al](#), show how vulnerable the cheetah is. Seventy-seven per cent of all remaining cheetah habitat is outside protected areas, creating greater vulnerability and the need to minimise the effects of human-wildlife conflict.

Where do cheetahs survive?

Cheetahs can now be found in only 23 African countries and Iran, the latter population being about 50 and in severe danger of further decline and extinction, despite conservation efforts by international conservation groups and the Iranian government. The population is [particularly threatened by diseases](#), including PPR (Peste des Petits Ruminants), that are reducing the numbers of prey species such as ibex, urial sheep, and gazelles.

In Africa, where numbers have steadily declined, 79 per cent of the remaining populations contain fewer than 100 individuals. The population of the west and north-west Sahara (Algeria, Mali and Niger), formerly numbering in the thousands across a huge area, is down to less than 200 and is critically endangered. Small, scattered populations in Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Central African Republic and South Sudan are also endangered, not least by poaching and the disruption of conservation efforts by insecurity, insurgency and civil war.

The [IUCN estimates the number](#) of cheetahs in western, central and northern Africa at 446, distributed across four populations with 217 individuals in Bahr/Salamat landscape in Chad and CAR; 201 in the Adrar des Ifhogas/Ahaggar/AjjarTassili landscape in Algeria and Mali; 23 in the WAP complex in Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso; four in Air et Tenere connected to another 1-2 individuals in the Termit Massiff, both in Niger – where the future of cheetah survival is bleak. Most cheetah in this region are outside protected areas, [according to IUCN studies](#), on lands occupied by sedentary or semi-nomadic pastoralist communities, whose own precarious livelihoods means they are understandably intolerant of livestock losses to predators.



www.cheetah.org Cheetah Conservation Fund

East Africa, once a stronghold of the cheetah, with extensive ranges across the savanna and open woodland areas in the Selous, Ruaha, Tarangire, Serengeti, Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Maasai Mara, Tsavo and Laikipia/Samburu areas, have seen a fall in cheetah numbers. The [region's population is estimated at 2,572](#) distributed across 15 sub-populations. Only [four are estimated to number 200 animals or more](#): 710 individuals in the Serengeti/Mara/Tsavo landscape in Kenya and Tanzania; 450 in the Laikipia/Samburu landscape in Kenya; 250 in the Omo Mago/Borena protected areas and buffer zones in Ethiopia; 200 in the Ruaha landscape in Tanzania. The region's population is vulnerable and is in decline, especially as some of [the major threats](#) to cheetah populations outside protected areas (national parks and reserves) are present. Notably changes in land tenure and use, increased use of fencing and land grabs which take away traditional grazing for pastoralist communities and grassland or wooded savanna areas vital for cheetah survival.

Southern Africa is the cheetah's regional stronghold, with about [4,190 distributed across ten sub-populations](#). The largest has an estimated 3,940 individuals spread across a large transboundary landscape covering Botswana, Namibia, northern South Africa, south-western Zambia and south-western Mozambique.

The other nine sub-populations are much smaller: 60 individuals in Kafue National Park, Zambia; 50 in and around Hwange National Park; 46 in Gonarezhou National Park and Save Conservancy; and 40 spread across three conservancies in southern Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe's population has plummeted from [1,200 in 1999 to 170](#). There are about 1,326

[cheetahs in South Africa](#) with another 293 in intensively managed populations on small fenced reserves that the IUCN has excluded from the overall population estimates.

Namibia's cheetah population – does it hold the key to survival?

The largest single population in one state is in Namibia. It is estimated at around 2,500, though it could be slightly higher, (more than a third of the entire wild population). This represents a significant rise from the estimate of [1,500 at the time of independence in 1990](#), after decades of habitat loss, poaching, killing by livestock farming and poorly regulated hunting. How has this been achieved?

Namibia has developed one of the more integrated and inclusive conservation programmes in Africa. This is not to say it is perfect and without continuing problems (human-wildlife conflict, poaching and loss of habitat), but it has the big plus of emphasising the involvement of local communities in decision-making over control of habitats and the species that inhabit them and how to utilise wildlife to both further conservation and develop livelihoods for the communities in arid areas with limited resources.

Namibia's government and communities have been prepared, amid criticism from [those who oppose hunting](#), to mix eco-tourism, full protection in national parks, regulated trophy hunting and game cropping in community-run conservancies and private game ranches or reserves (and this includes limited hunting on cheetah according to government-set quotas, as CITES allows southern African cheetah populations to be hunted on the basis that the populations are still viable and will not be significantly reduced by regulated hunting which provides income for local communities and wildlife departments).

Conservation in fully protected national parks has run alongside the community or private owned land and has been accompanied by government and local NGO education and conflict mitigation campaigns, often supported by international groups like [Panthera](#).

The Hanssen family's [Africat](#) and [Africat North](#), and Dr Laurie Marker's [Cheetah Conservation Fund](#) (CCF) have been at the forefront of education programmes, rehabilitating and relocating problem or injured cheetahs and developing conflict avoidance or mitigation strategies to reduce problems between predators and livestock farmers.

This may involve supporting communities to build predator-proof kraals, encouraging herding practices that restrict losses to cheetahs and other predators during the day or providing sheepdogs that deter cheetahs and other predators – [CCF has provided 650 Anatolian](#) shepherd and Kangal livestock guarding dogs for Namibian farmers.



A cheetah rescued after its mother was killed and relocated to Africat's Okonjima Reserve. © Keith Somerville

Helping avoid conflict between cheetahs and farmers is vital as 90 per cent of Namibia's cheetahs live on unprotected land, most of it potential or actual grazing land. Conflict with farmers is one of the most prevalent causes of cheetah deaths and is the main threat to the successes achieved since 1990 in restoring cheetah numbers and encouraging tolerance by farmers of predators.

Nevertheless, many are still being killed (shot, trapped or poisoned), while others are caught and groups like Africat or CCF seek to relocate them. Africat, as I found when I visited there in November 2017, is ramping up its education programmes and can also accommodate on its 22,000 acre reserve cheetahs which can't be relocated on farmland for various reasons.

Although populations in parks are protected, they number in the low hundreds and cannot achieve natural growth levels that would make up for losses among the vast majority on unprotected land. It means that finding routes to peaceful coexistence and protection of habitats and prey are vital on community and private land.

These must include both conservation of cheetahs and empowerment and income generation for farmers if the habitats are not to be turned over to forms of farming that would mean the end for the world's largest cheetah population.

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More information

[The fragile balance of Namibia's conversation policy](#)