

BFA SEMINAR SERIES NO. 16

Problem Cheetah in Zimbabwe in Relation to Land Use and Landowner Attitudes: Preliminary Results from the Marwell Zimbabwe Trust Cheetah Project *Gianetta Purchase*

Held at the Bulawayo Club, Thursday 10 October 2002.

The Marwell Zimbabwe Trust Cheetah Project has been running since May 2001, with a full time Project Coordinator since June 2002. It is carrying out a questionnaire survey of commercial and communal farming areas to determine where cheetahs occur and where they are considered to be problem animals.

The survey is linked to a database that stores all the information and allows analysis and the distribution of cheetah in relation to other spatial attributes to be mapped. Attitudes of land owners/users are also assessed through informal discussion and from problem animal reports to the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management. The survey helps determine what type of livestock management the land owner/user is practising so that relationships between management and the occurrence of “problem cheetahs” can be assessed.

Preliminary results suggest that cheetahs occur in throughout the west and in the south east of the country. Exact numbers are not yet known, but it appears that they are most abundant in commercial farming areas, with lower numbers in the National Parks estate and very few records from communal areas. Newly resettled areas also report cheetahs, and in these areas they are often considered a problem.

In commercial farming areas cheetahs appear to move across farm boundaries. The attitudes towards cheetahs are disjointed, so the environment for cheetahs is fragmented. However, cheetahs do not seem to avoid commercial farms where they are not tolerated but do seem to avoid resettled areas, even if the livestock in these areas are managed in a similar manner to commercial farming areas and wildlife is present. Some commercial farms have never had cheetah so there is probably a habitat influence as well, with densely wooded and bush encroached farms being unsuitable.

In communal farming areas results suggest that cheetahs are only seen in newly resettled farms, hyaenas and leopards are more common and often take livestock. However, the officers interviewed have indicated that these farmers are not tolerant of any predators, even with the promise of compensation.

Conclusions

Given these preliminary results, the distribution of the different land use types in Zimbabwe suggests that the environment is increasingly fragmented from the point of view of the cheetah. The National Parks estate, commercial farmland and communal and resettled farmland are all interspersed. As some types of farmland are not suitable for cheetahs, fewer areas remain that are large enough to maintain a viable cheetah population. This is made more uncertain by the current political situation where land ownership is unclear and with irresponsible use of resources.

However, there are ways of consolidating suitable cheetah habitat:

1. Both commercial and communal farmers can be encouraged to manage their livestock in a way that reduces cheetah predation, and therefore reduces the conflict and increases tolerance.
2. New livestock management techniques can be assessed for their usefulness in reducing cheetah predation.

3. Cheetahs considered to be causing a problem can be captured and translocated to areas where they are tolerated. This often only gives temporary relief and will further reduce and fragment the available cheetah habitat.
4. Results in Zimbabwe support the theory that areas with good wildlife populations suffer little livestock predation from cheetahs. Landowners should be encouraged to maintain wildlife on their properties.
5. Many landowners say they would be more tolerant of cheetahs if they could receive compensation, usually in the form of trophy hunting fees, although other methods can be explored. They would also be more tolerant if they could shoot “problem” cheetahs more easily without having to wait for a permit from the DNPWM.
6. Other incentive schemes should be explored, e.g. buying live problem cheetahs off farmers; linking tourism to cheetahs by promoting “cheetah friendly” farms; insurance schemes that pay out for livestock lost to cheetahs
7. The status of cheetahs in protected areas is not clear. It may be that populations in these areas are large enough to be viable.
8. Most importantly, the importance of private land to the survival of predator populations in Zimbabwe needs to be highlighted to decision-making bodies, as protected areas in the country are small and fragmented.