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## **CHEETAH 98 Fact Sheet (9/1/97)**

### **Cheetah** (*Acinonyx jubatis*)

**Description:** The sleek cheetah has many adaptations that help make it the world's fastest land animal. It has a lean body, with a small head and long legs. Its nonretractable claws give it a strong grip on the ground. Its body is about four feet long, not including its tail, which can reach three feet. It stands over three feet tall at the shoulder and weighs 75 to 125 pounds. The cheetah's top speed ranges from 55 to 70 miles per hour, but only for a maximum of 400 yards. Its face is marked with dark lines that run from the inside corners of its eyes to the outside corners of its mouth, while its coat is yellowish-grey with pale black spots.

**Range:** Cheetahs are found in many countries of eastern and southern Africa, with large populations in the Etosha region in Namibia and the Serengeti Plains in Tanzania. A remnant population is also found in Iran and Afghanistan.

**Habitat:** The Cheetah lives on grassy plains or savannahs.

**Diet:** The cheetah uses its spectacular speed to catch primarily small antelope.

**Social Organization:** Cheetahs are usually solitary hunters which come together only when breeding, though males may form lifelong coalitions of two or three individuals. Females usually have two to four cubs, which are out on their own in two years. Females keep a home range that is several times larger than males.

**Conservation Status:** Cheetahs are protected under Appendix I of CITES, are listed as a vulnerable species in the IUCN Red Data Book and as an endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. There are an estimated 9,000 - 12,000 cheetahs in the wild with the largest population (2,500) found in Namibia.

**Threats to Survival:** The cheetah is primarily threatened by loss of its habitat to human settlement. It has also been hunted as a livestock predator and occasionally for its fur. Disease surveillance in the cheetah is paramount. In the 1980's an outbreak of Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP) occurred in the cheetah. In 1995 a workshop on Feline Immunodeficiency Virus, Cheetah Immunodeficiency Virus and FIP in the cheetah was held

to develop guidelines for monitoring these diseases.

**Zoo Programs -- SSP:** While cheetahs are easily tamed and have been kept in captivity for thousands of years, it is difficult to breed them, and they are susceptible to many diseases. Research is being performed on their reproductive behavior. Studies in eastern and southern Africa have found that even wild cheetahs have very little genetic diversity -- they seem to have gone through a "genetic bottleneck" in their recent past, perhaps just 10,000 years ago. Despite these obstacles, there are over 300 cheetahs in the SSP program. Blood tests of the population are being used to determine which individuals may be carrying the deadly FIP disease. Nutritional, behavioral and reproductive evaluations of all SSP cheetahs have been done as well. The results of this work were documented in a special issue of Zoo Biology in 1993. To date (8/97) eight litters of cubs have been produced using assisted reproductive technology (artificial insemination). In November 1995, the first litter of cheetah cubs using frozen semen was produced in North America with germplasm collected in Namibia from a free ranging cheetah.

**Conservation:** While cheetahs are protected in many national parks and reserves, overcrowding in the parks causes cheetahs to lose many of their kills to other predators and forces them to leave the safety of the reserves. In February 1996, a Population Habitat Viability Analysis was held in Namibia and brought together all the stakeholders to address cheetah conservation issues. This Workshop assessed the threats to the cheetah in nature and identified what programs needed to be developed for its long term survival. The Cheetah Conservation Fund has developed numerous programs in Namibia to ensure the cheetah's long-term survival.

**Education:** Almost all zoos holding cheetahs have some type of public education program about this species. The SSP is working on developing an educational/informational brochure. The Namibian-based Cheetah Conservation Fund is working to educate the African ranchers and children on the importance of cheetahs in their range countries.

**Dedicated Fund:** A dedicated fund has been established at the Oklahoma City Zoological Park to support cheetah conservation programs. Contributions may be sent to: Cheetah SSP, c/o Oklahoma City Zoological Park, 2101 NE 50th, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73111.

**Contacts:**

SSP Coordinator: Jack Grisham

Oklahoma City Zoo

2101 NE 50th St.

Oklahoma City, OK 73111

(405) 425-0251

(405) 425-0207 FAX

Rev. 9/97 e-mail: [jmgcheta@okczoo.com](mailto:jmgcheta@okczoo.com)

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