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THE TRADE THREAT TO LEOPARDS AND CHEETAH

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Written by:



The legal and illegal trade in Leopards and Cheetah is substantially impacting on populations of these two species. In December 2010 the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) arranged a workshop to determine whether current South African hunting quotas for Leopards and the lack of any hunting quotas for Cheetah in the country are justified. The final report from this workshop is now available.

The legal trade of Cheetah in South Africa is poorly regulated with some so-called 'breeding centres' sourcing their animals from the wild. The trade in live Cheetah in South Africa is fraught with irregularities and loop holes in the permitting system. The Conservation Breeding Specialist Group Southern Africa (CBSG) and the EWT held a Population Habitat Viability Assessment (PHVA) for Cheetah in 2009. This workshop identified the removal of Cheetah through uncontrolled live trade and products, together with illegal hunting, as major threats to Cheetah survival on both a local and regional level.

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In 2005 the EWT and the CBSG held a PHVA to evaluate the current status of Leopard in South Africa, collate all available data and make informed recommendations on the management and conservation of this species. It estimated that illegal local hunting accounted for 43% of annual Leopard harvest, and suggested that even small Leopard populations can withstand the occasional removal of animals if illegal hunting is eliminated. The Red Data Book of Mammals of south Africa lists the greatest threat to Leopards as being are hunting, trapping, poisoning and general persecution.

In 2004, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) quota for Leopard *Panthera pardus* hunting in South Africa was increased from 75 to 150 animals. This was done despite a lack of adequate information on the size and trends of the national Leopard population. Evidence suggests that a significant number of Leopards are also hunted illegally in South Africa.

South Africa does not have a CITES quota for Cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus* trophies, although sectors such as the wildlife ranching and trophy hunting industries, are calling for that to change. The largest part of South Africa's Cheetah population occurs outside protected areas on privately owned cattle and wildlife ranches and as a result, conflict with landowners is common. Little is known about the status and growth trends of the Cheetah population in South Africa and the legal trade in live animals appears to be a major threat to Cheetah survival.

The CITES non detriment finding (NDF) assessment process is used to determine whether quotas of species affected by trade are justified. The December 2010 workshop, which was attended by 17 experts including scientists and government representatives, undertook an NDF assessment for Leopards and Cheetah. Both species listed are on CITES Appendix I, which states that trade in specimens of these species is permitted only in exceptional circumstances. Since there is an existing quota for trade in Leopards in South Africa, the process assessed the suitability of the current export quota for this species. For Cheetahs, the exercise assessed whether a CITES quota would be justified. Recommendations from the workshop:

For Leopards the findings support ongoing retention of a quota of 150 trophy Leopards in South Africa, however this needs to be done with key interventions to:

- improve monitoring of trophy hunting;
- improve monitoring of other forms of harvest including illegal off-take of Leopards;
- improve and standardise data capture and reporting;
- implement monitoring of Leopard populations;
- develop a national management plan for Leopards; and
- improve relationships between stakeholders involved in managing and utilising Leopards.

For Cheetah it was found that it would be inadvisable to issue a quota for the species at this time due to inadequate knowledge of the population size and population trends of this species, inadequate information on the scale and impacts of illegal harvesting (most notably illegal damage causing animal control and extraction of live wild animals for the captive trade), and a feeling that a quota for trophy hunting of Cheetah should not be issued until problems associated with the trophy hunting of Leopards are resolved. A number of recommendations were made for key interventions that are necessary before a Cheetah trophy hunting quota can be considered:

- An improved understanding of Cheetah abundance and trends in populations;
- Improving understanding of illegal off takes;
- Improve regulation of the captive industry; and
- Implementing improved systems for permitting and recording of Leopard hunting. Until problems associated with the trophy hunting of Leopards, which are a more common species, are resolved, trophy hunting of the much rarer Cheetah should not be considered.

The report findings have been presented to, and accepted by, the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) Scientific Authority and the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA). Through these channels the findings will assist in the regulation of trade in Leopards and Cheetah on the CITES appendices going forward.

To address the trade threats to Leopards and Cheetah, the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Carnivore Conservation Programme, in conjunction with SANBI, is implementing a project to assess the scale and impacts of consumptive utilisation of Leopards and Cheetah, and their body parts. Programme Manager Kelly Marnewick says: "We plan to work closely with all stakeholders including government, NGOs and all other industry members, to ensure that trade in these two species is managed in a sustainable way and that the populations of these key species in South Africa thrive."

This EWT's Carnivore Conservation Programme promotes carnivore research with an emphasis on implementing sound management strategies. Its vision is to develop southern Africa into a region where carnivores are managed in an ecologically and economically sustainable way, free from irrational and unnecessary persecution.

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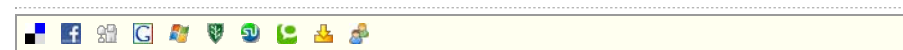
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