



Human Wildlife Conflict – Collaboration benefits cheetah and small-scale farmers

Conservation agencies and landowners recently collaborated to ensure the long-term protection of five cheetahs in the Namaqualand area of the Northern Cape Province. These cheetahs were originally spotted in 2023 by landowners near Namaqua National Park and later photographed by SANParks officials using camera traps within the park. It is worth noting that Namaqua National Park is an open park. SANParks has not introduced predators and has no plans to do so in terms of the Park Management Plan 2024. Unfortunately, the cheetahs occasionally moved beyond the safety of the National Park, bringing them into direct conflict with neighbouring subsistence and small-scale livestock farmers through livestock predation.

Despite attempts by livestock farmers to reduce predation impact, such as shepherding livestock into kraals at night, they suffered losses. Subsequently, landowners approached conservation agencies for assistance with human-wildlife conflict caused by predation in the area. Given its expertise in predator management (capture and translocation) and its involvement in a nationwide cheetah census with a recent focus in the Northern Cape, the Cheetah Outreach Trust was approached for assistance by the SA Hunters and Game Conservation Association, which represents some affected landowners.

However, these cheetahs disappeared for a significant period in 2024 before reappearing in December 2024. SANParks and the Cheetah Outreach Trust staff deployed camera traps and monitored them for several months in Namaqua National Park and surrounding farmlands. They confirmed that only one female cheetah, accompanied by four sub-adult cubs, lived in the area, moving between the National Park and neighbouring livestock farms, where livestock losses were recorded. Other predators, such as leopards, also occur in the area. While a portion of the predation can be linked to cheetahs, leopards account for the majority of livestock losses.

Assessments of losses in the area showed that communal farmers (28) from the Soebatsfontein community had lost 161 goats and sheep with a total value of R2.8 million to predation since 2023. During the same period, other farmers in the area lost 85 animals worth around R1.3 million, many of which were pregnant ewes. These communal and small-scale farmers are affected not only financially, but also in the long-term viability of their livestock operations. This, in turn, impacts their



ability to provide for their families, pay school fees, and maintain their overall quality of life. Due to the high levels of predation by leopards and cheetahs, many herders also feared going into the veld.

Because of persistent human-wildlife conflict and increased losses suffered by both communal and small-scale farmers in the absence of substantial initiatives, tensions have escalated between livestock farmers and conservation organisations. Considering the timeline of incidents and to reduce conflict while ensuring the safety of the cheetahs, classified as “Vulnerable” on the IUCN Red List, the affected stakeholders worked together to manage the cheetah effectively while developing a long-term strategy to collectively manage predation in the landscape in a meaningful way. The origin of these cheetahs is uncertain because Namaqua National Park does not fall in the natural distribution range of free-roaming cheetahs in South Africa, and SANParks had not introduced them.

While efforts to capture the cheetahs were underway, the provincial conservation authority, the Department of Agriculture, Environmental Affairs, Rural Development and Land Reform (DAERL), assisted a farmer who had recently lost eight animals to leopard predation to capture the damage causing leopard. Instead, the farmer captured a cheetah on his farm's boundary with the National Park, where these animals entered and exited his property. This presented an opportunity to capture all cheetahs under the supervision of the Cheetah Outreach Trust and in partnership with conservation authorities.

All parties involved in the project since its inception in 2023 have agreed that moving the cheetahs to an approved temporary holding facility would be the safest option for both livestock farmers and the cheetahs, until all alternatives for releasing them into a secure environment where they can contribute to cheetah conservation have been considered.

The following factors were considered in deciding on the cheetahs' future release location:

- The cheetahs occurred outside the current natural distribution range of free-roaming cheetahs, with no other observations of cheetahs in the area through camera traps or physical sightings and reports.
- None of the conservation areas within the area meets the legal fencing requirements to introduce and maintain cheetahs.
- Namaqua National Park does not anticipate the introduction of predators.
- The high levels of predation experienced by communal and small-scale livestock farmers.

- The absence of an integrated predation management strategy co-developed by all affected role-players, which reduced the farmers' tolerance levels toward predators in the landscape.
- The direct threats made by the farmers to take matters into their own hands if the impacts of predation are not addressed soon.

Following thorough discussions among the involved role-players it was decided to relocate the cheetahs to conservation areas where their chances of survival would be the highest and where they could contribute to South Africa's wild cheetah population. The DAERL, SA Hunters and Game Conservation Association, SANParks, Cheetah Outreach Trust, and farming associations that border Namaqua National Park plan to establish a wildlife management forum to develop an integrated, ecologically friendly strategy for managing large predators for the benefit of communities and wildlife in the area. This is an active response to the human-wildlife conflict in the area. Other organisations that can make a significant contribution to this goal are welcome to offer suggestions. Finally, it is anticipated that DNA studies of the cheetahs may shed light on their origins, given that they were not reintroduced into the Namaqualand area by SANParks or any other conservation group.