



Serengeti Cheetah Project

June 2011

This issue is going to be a special one – the story of how the project has been helping in the rescue and release of three cheetahs who had been caught by poachers.

Smuggled Cheetahs

It was in April that we got the disturbing news; three cheetahs had been found and confiscated from a poacher's house in Arusha, Tanzania's safari capital, at the beginning of the month. The cheetahs had been seized by the Anti-Poaching Unit of the Tanzanian Wildlife Division, although unfortunately the poacher himself wasn't caught. As soon as we heard of the cheetahs' plight we immediately offered our assistance to the Wildlife Division to try and resolve the situation as quickly as possible.



The older female in her tiny cage

The three cheetahs were being kept at the Anti-Poaching Unit in Arusha and as soon as it could be arranged I went over to see them. It turned out the three consisted of an adult male, an adult female and a young female. They were all very stressed by their situation and were still being held in the very small transport cages which they were confiscated from the poacher in.

Our first priority was, of course to minimise the amount of time that the cheetahs were going to be in captivity. The factor which caused the most difficulty for the release effort



The three cheetahs in their cages at the Anti-Poaching Unit in Arusha

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was that Tanzania doesn't have any holding facilities suitable for rehabilitating cheetahs meaning that we immediately had to start looking into the logistics of building such facilities – a mammoth task to undertake. The other big problem was that because the poacher had not been found we didn't know how long the cheetahs had been in the cages for or where they had come from. Luckily, despite their terrible ordeal the cheetahs seemed to still be in relatively good condition. Cheetahs are very difficult to keep in captivity - because they do not naturally scavenge food, getting them to accept food is often not easy. However, these three seemed to have a real desire to live and had been taking whatever food they were given.

Initially it looked like we were going to be looking after these cheetahs for a long time – the Wildlife Division needed to keep the cheetahs as evidence in the court case against the poacher. Court cases usually take months to complete, and often they run into years. In this case we were lucky, after a few days we went back to speak to the head of the Anti-Poaching Unit and he had great news for us, the court case had progressed enough that the cheetahs were no longer needed and therefore could be released!

During this time we had been consulting with other cheetah experts with experience in translocations about how best to proceed with the cheetahs' plight. Once we had the good news from the Anti-Poaching Unit it was decided that, as the cheetahs were still in good condition, and as they had all been taken from the wild as adults (and were therefore able to hunt for themselves) that they should be released as soon as possible in what is termed a hard release. This means that rather than a staged, soft release where the cheetahs are kept in enclosures for several weeks before their release, their cages are simply opened and they are allowed to go free. It was felt this was most appropriate because, as I said before, Tanzania has no rehabilitation facilities suitable for cheetahs meaning we would have had to build bomas for the cheetahs from scratch, something that would have taken several weeks in itself. Every day that a cheetah is kept in captivity it becomes a bit harder to successfully release them back into the wild; it was therefore decided to get them back out as soon as possible.

As soon as we'd had word that the cheetahs were free to be released we started making plans. As we still had no word where the cheetahs had been taken from we had to work out where to put them back. It was everyone's best guess that the cheetahs had probably come from somewhere reasonably close to Arusha,



The male cheetah pacing in his cage

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possibly from the Maasai Steppe close to Tarangire National Park. This is because there is a good cheetah population there and it is within easy reach of Arusha, being less than two hours by car on a good tarmac road. We also checked that the cheetahs did not match any of the cheetahs already known to the project, either from Serengeti or any of the other national parks we have had sightings sent to us from. It was therefore decided that the most appropriate place to release the cheetahs was within Tarangire. Once this decision was made there was a whirlwind few days of some seriously hard work, getting all the relevant permissions in and organising the logistics of the release operation. In order to allow us to follow up on the cheetahs' progress after their release, we needed to fit them with radio collars. Luckily for us Frankfurt Zoological Society had some very high tech collars which they kindly lent to us. These collars not only had normal radio tracking capabilities, they also had a GPS receiver in them, meaning we would be able to follow the cheetahs' movements on the internet! We then had to organise veterinary assistance to enable us to fit the collars which was done through the TAWIRI - Messerli Foundation Wildlife Veterinary Programme. As I'm sure you can all imagine we had a lot of help from many different people, particularly in the run up to the release, there was a great joint effort by the Wildlife Division, Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) and the Tanzania Wildlife Research Institute (TAWIRI) to ensure we had all the permissions and support we needed to make sure the release was successful. There were also the more basic things to consider, like finding a truck to transport the cheetahs in on their journey to Tarangire, which was provided by the Friedkin Conservation Fund and Tanzania Game Tracker Safaris. I spent all of the next few days phoning people to confirm plans, emailing, skyping and running around town to get all the little things that were important for helping to make the release a success.

The release team left Arusha with the cheetahs in the evening of 21st April. The decision was made to travel to Tarangire at night to try and reduce the stress levels of the cheetahs, it meant that it was much cooler and there was less traffic around than during the day. Foremost in all the planning of the release was the need to reduce the cheetahs' stress levels, animals can die from stress and so we did our best to ensure they suffered as little as possible. After a long, slow journey we arrived at the park late that night and made our way to Tarangire Safari Lodge who had generously agreed to accommodate both the cheetahs and the entire release team. Upon our arrival we gave the cheetahs some water to drink and then, after a quick once over by Richard, the vet, they were left in peace to recover from the journey.



Loading the cheetahs into smaller vehicles for the final leg of their journey

The next morning the team was up and starting preparations well before sunrise. The cheetahs were moved into smaller vehicles for the last leg of the journey to the release site. It had been decided that they would be released in an area known as the small Serengeti, just a few kilometres from the Lodge. Just as the sun was rising the team started our slow procession to the release site. When we got there the cheetahs were unloaded from the vehicles and put in a quiet area under the shade of a group of acacia trees whilst Richard made a more thorough assessment than of their condition than he'd been able to the night before. Although all the cheetahs

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were looking very thin, they were all still in surprisingly good condition and so Richard agreed to immobilise and fit collars to two of the cheetahs, we decided not to collar the younger female because, due to her age, there was a risk her neck would fill out a bit and made the collar too tight.



The adult female was immobilised and had her collar fitted first. You could feel the tension and the anticipation as Richard loaded the anaesthetic and darted her. After her initial indignation at being darted she went under quickly and we could start fitting the collar. There is always a risk involved in anaesthetising any animal and so it is very important that their vital signs are monitored closely – this is why in operating theatres there is always a huge bank of machines keeping an eye on things like breathing and heart rate. Obviously in the middle of the African bush, under a stand of acacia trees is no place for such high tech machinery so different members of the release team were allocated jobs such as watching the cheetah's chest to count number of breaths per minute and taking her temperature every few minutes to ensure she didn't over heat (one of the side effects of the anaesthetic is that the animal loses the ability to control their body temperature). Whilst the collar was being fitted we gave the cheetah a



once over to check for any injuries we hadn't seen before. Although she didn't have any cuts or wounds we did discover what a horrendous state her feet were in as a result of standing on the wire floor of the cage she had been kept in. Her pads were all very ridged and must have causing her a lot of discomfort, in an attempt to get the blood flowing back into them and start getting her muscles working again she was given a thorough foot and leg massage! Once the collar was on we put her back in her cage while she came around. Although we were obviously keen to get her out as soon as possible we want to make sure that she had come around fully from the anaesthetic before letting her go, we didn't want to risk her running off and getting into some sort of trouble when she was still drowsy from the drugs.

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Whilst the female was recovering we started the process of collaring the male. Once again Richard loaded the anaesthetic and darted him. This time we were shown how important it was to have someone monitoring his vital signs. The female had dealt with being immobilised with no problems but the male didn't respond quite so well and had to be given a drug to help stimulate him to breathe more regularly. Thanks to the watchfulness of the team he was never in any real danger, and if he had started to seriously deteriorate then he would have been given the reversal drug to bring him round from the anaesthetic, but it did add to the tension! His feet had also been badly affected by standing on the wire floor of his cage and so he got a foot and leg massage as well before being returned to his cage to recover.

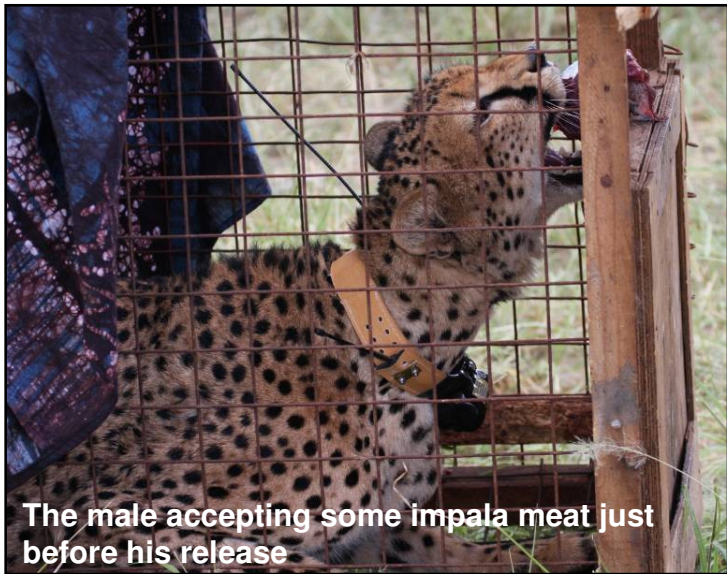
By this time the female had come around fully from her anaesthesia and was obviously keen to be released, the big moment was approaching! Everyone trooped over and carefully placed themselves so that we could get all the photos we'd need to tell the story but also so that we wouldn't be in her way as she left the cage. The back of the cage was covered with a tarpaulin to encourage her to focus on the door and therefore the way out. After a brief pause to make sure everyone was ready, Richard leaned over and lifted the door. I think everyone was expecting her to immediately turn around and leap out of the cage to freedom but unfortunately she seemed to decide that she liked the dark provided by the tarpaulin and was facing the wrong way! After a bit of tapping at the front of the cage to get her attention she did eventually turn around, only to sit there and stare out at the world for a few minutes – a particularly unfortunate feature of her cage was that the door was very low down and meaning that at her eye level all she could see was wire and so she hadn't realised that the door was open and she could go free! After a couple more minutes and a little encouragement she finally realised and poked her head through the doorway, obviously hardly believing her luck! Then there was a tentative foot stepping out, followed by another until finally she just went for it and ran, not stopping to even look back until she was almost out of sight! It was a very exciting, very emotional moment after all our hard work!



The older female making her break for freedom

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The male accepting some impala meat just before his release

Soon after this the TANAPA rangers returned with some game meat for us to give to the other two cheetahs before their release. It was unfortunate that the collared female didn't get any food before her release but as she was getting so stressed that she wouldn't even drink any water, we'd decided it was better to just let her go - the chances were that she wouldn't have accepted any food either. The young female and the male were then given an impala leg each to munch their way through before they were let go.

It had not been all that long since the male cheetah had come round from the anaesthetic so it was decided to release the youngster next. Everyone took up their positions again and the door was opened, and like a

bolt of lightning she ran out of the cage as soon as the door was up enough for her to squeeze her way underneath. What was devastating to see, however, was that after her time in the cage she couldn't keep running for very long. Because she wasn't being fitted with a collar she hadn't been immobilised and therefore we hadn't been able to thoroughly check her over and she hadn't had the foot and leg massage that the others were given. This meant she was finding it very difficult to walk and was only able to go about fifty metres before lying down under a tree to rest. As there was nothing else we could do for her we had to leave her and hope that after a couple of hours she would be able to move more easily. We then turned our attention back to the male. He was now quite awake and it was decided that to limit the amount of stress to the young female by our continued presence in the area, that we would release him now and that I would stay in the area for a few more hours to keep an eye out for lions and any other predators that might pose a threat to our newly released charges.

For one last time the cage was covered with a tarpaulin, everyone took up their positions, the door was lifted and we waited... and we waited... and we waited... and the cheetah decided (despite being able to clearly see that the door was open and freedom awaited him) that he would just finish his impala leg before he left! After nearly ten minutes and quite a lot of encouragement he finally wandered out of his cage to freedom. He was obviously still a little groggy from the anaesthetic which explained his relaxed attitude to his release but he walked away and lay down to keep an eye on what we were doing. At that point the work was done for most of the release team so everyone packed up and made their way back either to Arusha or to the Lodge. I stayed for another few hours to make sure the male had completely recovered from the effects of the drugs and was amazed (and very pleased) to see him wander back over to the release site to finish off the impala!



His first glimpse of freedom

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The male leaving his cage

The next morning I went out early to try and find the cheetahs again. Unfortunately I couldn't find the young female, and in fact to this day she hasn't been seen again. We will probably never know what happened to her, unless one day she turns up in someone's photos which are sent into our Cheetah Watch campaign. I was able to find both the collared cheetahs thanks to the radio collars. Neither had moved very far from the release site and were both looking around, wide-eyed at their surroundings, almost as though they couldn't believe their luck and weren't quite sure what to do with themselves!



The older female the morning after her release

Over the next few weeks we made frequent trips to Tarangire to track the cheetahs and monitor their progress. The female was very difficult to follow as she seemed to have a preference for hiding herself away in thick bush so although we could pin-point her position we usually didn't get to actually see her. The male was much easier to keep an eye on but unfortunately he did not cope well with his release and despite our best efforts

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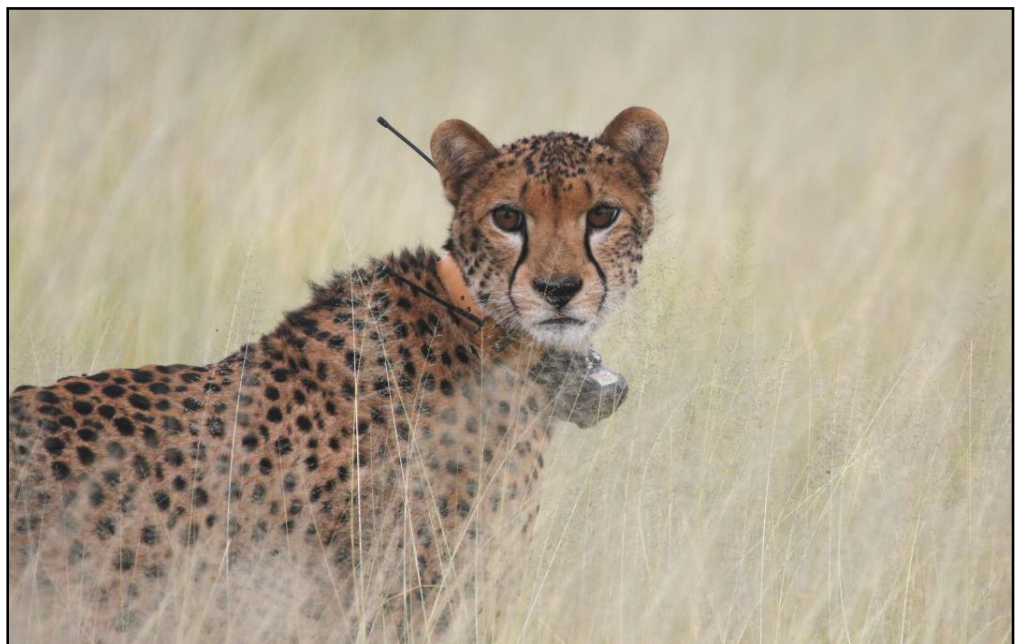


at giving him supplementary food he went into decline and just recently died. In order to establish what happened to him we conducted a post mortem and it seems he was just unlucky and had had some kind of accident soon after his release, leaving him with a fracture on his pelvis. This had resulted in his not being able to walk properly and therefore was unable hunt causing his decline and death. We don't know how he sustained the injury but it seems most likely that he was a victim of an unfortunate accident whilst trying to hunt – probably being kicked by the animal he was trying to kill.

We have been able to track the female using the GPS function on her radio collar. In the days and weeks after her release we know that she has moved a long way from the release site. This suggests that she is not only doing well but is also hunting successfully for herself, which is obviously very good news.

The story of these three poor cheetahs highlights a growing threat to cheetah populations world-wide. The reason they had been taken from the wild was to fuel the increasing demand for cheetahs in the pet-trade. The trade in exotic “pets” is a huge problem; particularly in the Middle East where having these beautiful creatures as pets is seen as a status symbol with no thought given to what the impact might be on the wild populations. Cheetahs are very difficult to keep successfully in captivity and it is extremely difficult to get captive cheetahs to breed, which is why they are taken from the wild. We are working to combat the issue of the trade in cheetahs as part of our range-wide program (for more information see: www.cheetahandwilddog.org). What happened to these cheetahs, particularly the male, shows that releasing cheetahs back into the wild is not an easy process and that working towards reducing the trade and the demand for pet cheetahs is a huge priority. Until now, cheetahs in Tanzania have been relatively safe from the trade, as cheetahs closer to the horn of Africa can be more easily caught and shipped over to the Middle East. But we are receiving reports that cheetahs are becoming wiped out across much of the horn of Africa, and the capture of these cheetahs indicates that Tanzania may be starting to become a target for traders. We are now working towards ensuring that if something like this happens again that we are more prepared – with these cheetahs our only option was to do a hard release as there were no rehabilitation facilities available. We are now looking towards building such a facility so that any future victims of poachers can be as fully rehabilitated as possible before their release, and we would appreciate any support for this.

This has been a very stressful, emotional and difficult few months, and the story isn't over yet. It's difficult to know what the future holds, either for the two released females or for cheetahs as a species. Everyone working on, and affiliated to, the project is continuing to work on giving them all the best chance of survival possible. And remember, the best way to see cheetahs is (and always will be) in the wild, from a distance, using binoculars!



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