



saving serengeti's CHEETAHS

Across the continent, from projects like the Cheetah Conservation Fund in Namibia to smaller localised efforts in private reserves like Samara in South Africa, many hundreds of people are working to protect Africa's cheetahs.

Sue Watt meets one of them, in Tanzania's Serengeti plains

“Clementine is so elegant and she's very special,” Dennis Minja told me. “But she's not around very often.” The sole researcher for the Serengeti Cheetah Project, Dennis wasn't eulogising about some elusive supermodel, but about a beautiful big cat he's come to know and love through his work. “She was the first cheetah I ever saw, just sitting by a tree near our base on my first day in the job. She's my favourite, but she's away in the woodlands just now,” he said fondly.

The Serengeti Cheetah Project (SCP), which started in 1974, is the world's longest-running study of wild cheetahs. Today, it's managed by the Zoological Society of London in partnership with the Wildlife Conservation Society. Their study area, taking in the Serengeti Plains and Ndutu, is home to one of the most significant cheetah populations in Africa, with around 100 adults and 30 cubs.

As with other predators, cheetahs play an important part in protecting nature's delicate balance by keeping the antelope population in check. Without them, the plains would be swarming with gazelle and impalas in unsustainable numbers, denuding the grasses for other grazers.

Because of SCP's longevity, its researchers have studied generations of these graceful big cats, gaining valuable insights into their lives – and deaths. It's revealed much of what we now know about cheetahs, including their vast home ranges, the coalitions formed by males, and the solitary yet promiscuous lives of females – a litter of cubs may have many fathers. It's also highlighted the threats to their survival.

“Cheetahs have a tough life: 19 out of 20 cubs are killed by lions or hyenas, or die in bushfires,” Dennis explains. “They suffer through loss of habitat and prey. Local Maasai kill them to protect their goats. Snares trap them. And they can die in road accidents. Four were killed within just two

years in Serengeti so we ran an awareness campaign with flyers saying: ‘Kill Your Speed, Not Wildlife.’ Thankfully, road-kills have decreased for now.”

Dennis' interest in wildlife flourished from the age of 12, inspired by family friends who were national park managers. “I really wanted to be among people dedicating their lives to conserve the wonderful wild animals I'd seen on TV documentaries,” he tells me.

After graduating in Wildlife Management, he became a research assistant for African Wildlife Foundation and later for Tanzania People and Wildlife Fund. In 2014, he joined SCP just before I first met him, always smiling and full of passion and excitement for his new job. That hadn't diminished when I caught up with him again last November in the remote Eastern Serengeti. Closed to the public for big cat research until 2014, it's one of the best places in Africa to see cheetahs and lions. But it isn't always easy.

Almost every day, Dennis searches these seemingly endless plains. “Normally, I start at 6.30am, driving around and stopping at elevated spots for scanning. Once I find a cheetah, I approach slowly and stop a few metres away to take some I.D. photographs and record the number of individuals, their age, sex, body condition, weather conditions, their activities etcetera, and collect samples of poop for DNA.”

Dennis also has the privilege of naming new cheetahs. Although 13-year-old twins Amaretto and Bailey were named before he arrived, he's continued the drinks theme with Amaretto's daughter, Campari. Tia Maria, Brandy and Pimms also stalk these savannahs, along with film stars including Jake and Elwood, from the 1980's movie *Blues Brothers*, and Grace Kelly.

“My goal is to locate 20 different cheetahs each month, aiming to capture their birth and death rates and their recruitment rate – the ratio of the number of cubs seen to the number of productive females,” he says. “But they're not collared and often live in inaccessible areas. Sometimes,

Big cat or small cat?

Technically speaking, a cheetah is a not a 'big cat'. True big cats make up the genus *Panthera* and share certain key anatomical features, including an adaptation of the larynx that enables them to roar. There are five species: lion, tiger, leopard, jaguar and snow leopard. The cheetah, which cannot roar, is the only species in the genus *Acinonyx*. Its closest relatives are thought to be the puma and jaguarundi of the Americas

BENOIT BUSSARD, TAKEN IN THE MAASAI MARA, KENYA

irresponsible guides drive off-road, shouting and calling, which makes them move to woodlands rather than open grasslands.”

But well-managed tourism can help rather than hinder research. Cheetahs traipse over vast territories, making them notoriously difficult to track, and Dennis can't be everywhere. Hence, SCP's Cheetah Watch Campaign encourages tourists to email them their cheetah photos with details of their locations. With unique spot patterns, images of their flanks are checked against the database. If there's a match, the visitor receives personal information about 'their' cheetahs. If not, they've helped to identify newcomers.

“We have nearly 2500 images in the matching programme, helping us to build up the cheetahs' stories,” Dennis tells me.

In 2014, I'd sent him images of a cheetah I'd seen, all lithe and long legged, stalking a little Thomson's gazelle. Dennis confirmed she was 11-year old Courtney, first seen in July 2003 and sighted regularly throughout her life. “Despite her ability to keep herself alive,” his email stated, “she's never raised a cub to adulthood despite several attempts.” Five years on, I doubted she was still alive. “She hasn't been seen for two years,” he confirms. “We think she must be dead...”

I ask about Clementine too. “She's still not back,” he says. “I'm afraid she might be dead, but who knows?” I hope not.

Looking to the future, SCP plans to use GPS collars on cheetahs for the first time, tracking individuals that frequent the Ngorongoro area close to Maasai communities. “I'll be researching where cheetahs go when Maasai encroach on their habitats for cattle pastures, and how Maasai *bomas* displace cheetahs and affect their ranging patterns.”

He'll be continuing this theme in his imminent PhD studies at Glasgow University, researching the impact that human behaviour in pastoralism and tourism has on cheetahs and their prey. His eventual recommendations for fostering coexistence with cheetahs will benefit not just the Serengeti but ecosystems further afield too.

“As one of the few young Tanzanians in this field, I want to become a voice for cheetahs both at home and beyond,” he tells me. “The more time I spend with these beautiful cats, the more I want to know about them. My aim is to make the world a better place for cheetahs.” 🐾