

Roar power

Cheetahs are the star attraction at a safari camp in Namibia, where a charity works to protect the big cats. By Colin Barraclough

By the time I spotted Portia's approach, she was already upon us. Perfectly camouflaged amid central Namibia's scrub-covered plains, the cheetah had slunk silently through thigh-length grasses to materialise a few feet from our safari truck.

Portia let out a venomous hiss but soon forgot her ire. With a cheetah's habitual look of infinite melancholy, she sprang atop a 6ft termite mound, gazed out towards the Omboroko Mountains' sandstone escarpments, and let out a plaintive mew.

Dean Mafika, a camp guide, began to laugh. "You sound just like a tabby cat," he teased. "You're supposed to sound vicious."

Portia is accustomed to such close contact with tourists. At a matronly 12 years, she is too old to be released into the wild, so serves instead as an "ambassador cat" for Okonjima Lodge, an upmarket safari camp 125 miles north of Windhoek, the Namibian capital. Visitors come to track hyena, hike the trails through the bush, or search for the Damara rockrunner, the rarest of the 250 bird species frequently spotted on the property.

What they mostly want, though, is the chance to get a close-up look at cheetahs because the lodge is also home to the AfriCat Foundation, a non-profit outfit set up to protect Namibia's big cats.

A quarter of the world's cheetahs, about 3,000, live in Namibia, a country twice the size of California with a human population of just 2m. Yet even in its vast plains and big-sky deserts, prime carnivore real estate is dwindling fast. Cattle farms now cover half the country and few farmers take kindly to deadly predators menacing their herds.

In the 1980s, Namibia's farmers trapped, poisoned or shot more than 800 cheetahs a year – a stomach-churning collection of traps and

snares is displayed at Okonjima – in a killing spree that halved the country's free-roaming population.

Today, the kill rate has slowed to 200 animals a year, thanks to the work of AfriCat and two similar organisations, the US-funded Cheetah Conservation Fund and German-run IZW. Together, the groups promote tolerance of big cats among farmers, advocating the use of herd dogs and specialist fencing to protect calves. Their words are backed up by hands-on rescue and rehabilitation of animals trapped on private land.

Since 1993, AfriCat alone has saved 650 cheetahs, of which 80 per cent were subsequently set free, usually elsewhere in Namibia. Healthy adult cats are re-released within a day; the

injured are brought back for treatment, the orphaned for the lengthier task of developing the survival skills they will need in the wild.

Dave Houghton, a burly Englishman with lank hair and a capable manner, came to Okonjima in 1995 to make a television documentary about cheetahs. Captivated by big cats, he became the foundation's rescue officer and has been at the sharp end of carnivore conservation ever since.

Houghton led me between rows of one-hectare enclosures, holding pens for injured cats or those awaiting a move to enclosures large enough to hunt. "You learn to recognise each animal by its face, by the way it walks," he said, greeting the cats by their names.

Preparing orphaned cheetah cubs for freedom is among the trickiest jobs. "Cheetahs instinctively want to chase prey but an orphaned cub lacks the killing technique, the choke-hold that asphyxiates an animal," he said. Without a mother's training, it often fails to recognise enemy species or takes on prey that is simply too large or too feisty. "Orphans often get injured because they just don't know any better. They try to fight leopards or take on an adult giraffe."

Houghton's pragmatic style – along with the scars that come from 14 years of working around some of the animal kingdom's sharpest claws – have won him a grudging respect among Namibia's farmers. "I never profess to know all the answers," he

explained. "The old diehards will shoot everything they see, and there's little I can do to get through to them. But most farmers are not bad people. They're just trying to make a living on difficult land."

With growing numbers of big cats coming through Okonjima, more space is required. A new 16,000-hectare enclosure is scheduled to open in December, destined for semi-wild cheetahs, leopards and wild dogs to take their last step before true freedom.

Among its first residents will be Harley, Aprilia and Ducati, seven-month-old cheetah cubs whose mother was shot on a farm near Windhoek. "They run so fast we named them after motorbikes," said Carla Conradi, an AfriCat director. Sprightly

and alert, the cubs are strong candidates for eventual release. "They'll make it back to the wild. I'm sure of it," she said.

Details

Colin Barraclough was a guest at Okonjima Lodge (www.okonjima.com). AfriCat Foundation (www.africat.org) is based at the lodge, where double rooms cost from US\$250-US\$1,000. Abercrombie & Kent includes two nights at the lodge in a 12-day Namibia itinerary, starting at £5,995 per person, including flights, transfers, accommodation and most meals. (www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)

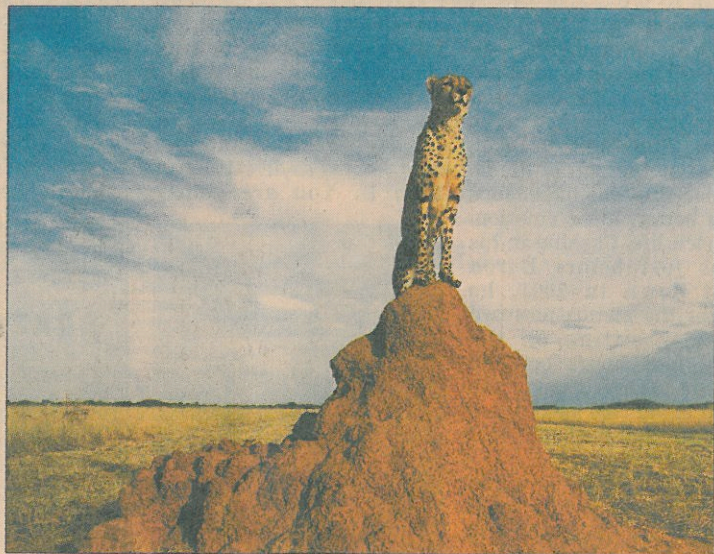
WILD IDEAS

Bushmen put scientists on the right track

"San Bushmen can consistently identify individual cheetahs from their footprints," said Florian Weise, cheetah researcher at N/a'an ku sê, a wildlife sanctuary 30 miles east of Windhoek. "We hope computers can do the same."

Weise is at the forefront of a pioneering scheme that aims to identify cheetahs by their paw prints. The technique, roughly analogous to identifying humans from their fingerprints, could change the way conservationists monitor endangered species in the wild.

Existing techniques to track animals' movements can be invasive or inaccurate: radio collaring causes stress, and aerial surveys are tricky, particularly in forested terrain. If cheetahs could be identified



Hunter A cheetah surveys the plains in Namibia

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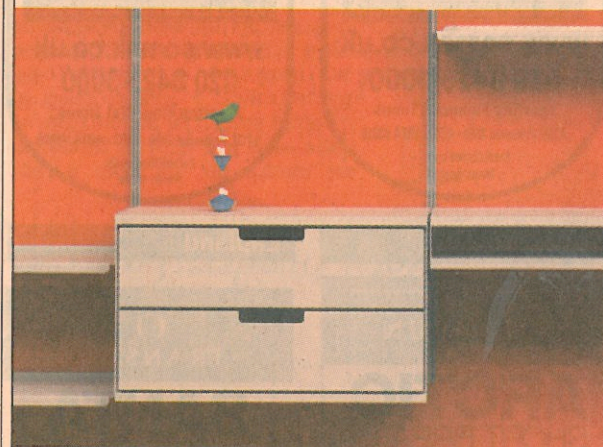
individually from their tracks, researchers argue, they could monitor a free-roaming individual's movements without needing to spot the animal itself.

Namibia is the ideal place to test the new technique. By analysing the prints of captive and collared cheetahs at sanctuaries such as N/a'an ku sê and AfriCat, project developer Zoe Jewell of animal monitoring group WildTrack aims to produce an algorithm that could be applied to free-roaming cheetahs.

The inspiration, she said, came from Zimbabwean trackers, who can identify individual black rhinos by merely glancing at marks in the earth. "We're trying to distil ancient techniques and make them accessible to western science," said Jewell.

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