

The adventures of Tintin the cheetah

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It looked like he was going to suffer from the worst hangover ever. Tintin was completely passed out. He was lying in a darkened room with his coarse pink tongue dangling from his mouth like a naughty schoolboy's shirt hanging from his pants. His long legs were sprawled awkwardly, and a dark blue airline-issued eye cover was fitted lopsided across his head. Like his namesake, Tintin the cheetah has survived almost as many adventures as the world famous young boy in the cartoon series. He and his four siblings were six months old when their mother was shot on a farm near Grootfontein. They spent 11 days in a cage before they were taken up in the welfare programme of the Africat Foundation in May last year.

Earlier this month Tintin looked "out for the count" because of a dose of anaesthetics that ensured he did not remember anything of the next big adventure of his life. Tintin was one of 39 cheetahs to be examined during the three-day annual veterinary inspection at Africat. One of the requirements of having large carnivores in captivity in Namibia is an annual veterinary inspection. At Africat this exercise has become a major event. This year five veterinarians, of whom four travelled from South Africa to the Africat base at Okonjima, about 50 km south of Otjiwarongo, volunteered their services.

Research



"We are taking the opportunity to ensure the best possible health of each cheetah," said Dr Mark Jago from the Otjiwarongo Veterinary Clinic, in charge of the medical side. The opportunity to see so many wild animals under sedation in such a short space of time makes the exercise very valuable for research. "It is a win-win situation as the vets donate their time to the welfare of the cheetah in exchange for gathering valuable data," says Carla Conradie,

Director of Africat.

She is as highly strung as a cheetah stalking prey as she co-ordinates the intricacies of the exercise to ensure everything runs smoothly. "I don't enjoy it," she says pointing to her colleague Dave Houghton as he walks to a holding camp with a dart gun to start off the hour-long process each cheetah has to undergo. "They panic quickly," she says as the cheetahs in the camp start pacing frantically. Jago agrees that darting is the most risky component of the process. "We aim to get them to sleep as soon as possible without hurting or overheating them." As Tintin and his spotted brothers start showing off why they are the fastest land animals on earth, Houghton's job gets more complicated. But he and Jago have perfected the art of darting and managed to hit them "spot on" every time.

Since the start of the annual health checks, Africat has learned valuable lessons in minimising possible problems. The cats are held in a holding camp from the night before to limit their mobility and prevent them from running around too much before and after receiving the

anaesthetic. After about five minutes the drug takes effect. The sight of Houghton carrying a completely docile 17-month-old Tintin in his arms, spur the waiting vets into action.

Expert attention



First stop is Dr Gary Bauer, a veterinary ophthalmologist from the Animal Eye Clinic in Cape Town. His examination focuses on the presence of thorns and cataracts. "We have found a very high incidence of corneal injury among cheetahs." Bauer attributes a 73 per cent incidence of corneal scarring, and 37 per cent of cataracts among cheetahs examined by him since 1998 to the fact that the cats are forced to live in bush encroached areas. He explains

that as cheetahs used to hunt in open plains, their eyes are much more exposed on their heads than lion and leopard for instance who stalk their targets.

He often finds cheetahs with thorns in their eyes, which cause corneal injury. The injury sets up inflammation, which could form a cataract and eventual blindness.



Bauer is very excited about the research aspect of his work. He has found over the years that eye injuries of Africat cheetahs are declining as the number of orphans, who do not hunt, increases. Tintin's eyes were no exception, and he is carried on a stretcher to Dr Gerhard Steenkamp, a veterinary dentist of the Veterinary Faculty at Onderstepoort in South Africa. "Cheetahs have a lot of dental problems, of which fractured teeth are the most common," says Steenkamp.

Assisted by Dr Gianfranco Danzi from Rome, Italy, they ended up spending a lot of time on patient's requiring tooth extractions, or even root canals. "We try and preserve as many teeth as possible and therefore perform root canals," says Steenkamp, who is in the third year of doing research on lesions on the palates by looking at two different populations.

Danzi, who arrived all the way from Rome with an X-ray machine he donated to Africat, is equally excited about working on wild cats. It comes as a welcome change to treating dogs and cats every day. But he admits, "cheetahs are very similar to cats, they are just bigger!" As a youngster Tintin's teeth looked good, and after his blood pressure was taken, he moved to the next table.

Little stress



Dr Remo Lobetti, a veterinary specialist from Johannesburg, is back for a second year to take gastric biopsies. Using a gastroscope, he looks for clinical signs of gastritis, reported to be common among captive cheetahs. Gastritis is the inflammation of the stomach, believed to be stress-related, and causes chronic vomiting and severe weight loss. Lobetti says stress in captive cheetahs is most probably caused by factors such as small camps, different populations forced

together and contact with people.

Lobetti heard of the Africat cheetahs when he was working on cheetahs at the De Wildt reserve in South Africa. He has started comparing different populations of cheetah. Although

his study would still take another two years to compete, he has so far found there was not a high incidence of gastritis at Africat. "I guess we can say the Africat cheetahs are stress free."

Contraception

With Tintin still fast asleep, he is moved to Professor Henk Bertschinger from the Faculty of Veterinary Science at Onderstepoort, University of Pretoria. The Professor is responsible for one of the vital procedures of the annual check-up - contraception. Cheetahs in captivity are not allowed to breed, which means those held in enclosures with both males and females need to get the treatment. Bertschinger was the first veterinarian to use a new drug called Deslorelin, developed in Australia for dogs, on wild carnivores. So far he has used it on wild dogs, lions, leopards, cheetahs, as well as baboons and monkeys in zoos.

The drug is implanted in the neck of the cat using a syringe, and lasts for about 18 months. "We apply it on an annual basis to be sure," says Bertschinger. "It works very well." He is full of praise for the drug saying it works different to hormonal and anti-baby pills, as it merely delays breeding, and has no side effects. "It does make their testicles shrink," was Conradie's comment on the effect it had on male felines. The drug is also reversible, which means females can conceive again after 18 months. Bertschinger felt the use of the drug was no longer experimental, as he had implanted it in more than 400 wild animals with a 100 per cent success rate for most animals.

Centre of attention



well.

While Bertschinger carries out more checks, including measuring his testicles, and taking blood samples, Tintin receives his routine jabs for normal cat diseases from Dr Jago. He also examines him for any wounds that may need to be stitched up. With each vet assisted by several volunteers, Tintin would sometimes receive the simultaneous attention of five people. His heart rate, temperature and respiratory rate were regularly checked throughout, while someone else would be brushing him as



feat."

Alan Hufton, chairperson of Africat UK, and his wife Sue, are regular volunteers. So is Joanna Oliver, founder of Africat UK ten years ago. She says it really feels good to be part of something successful. Diana Reynolds-Hale, and her husband Richard, have been involved with Africat from the very beginning as sponsors. "I can't stay away," says Diana. "This is one of the animal charities that has really made a difference. More than 700 cats in ten years is an amazing



Tintin's time is running out and he might not be in such a co-operative mood for much longer. He is quickly weighed and then dipped. At 35 kg, he still has a long way to get to eight-year-old Willow's weight of 52 kg. Willow might have been the heaviest of the 39 cats examined, but the heaviest male recorded so far at Africat was 62 kg. Just as well Tintin would not remember anything of the procedure as he is completely submerged, except his head, into a bath

of dip for ticks and fleas. Tintin receives his last jab, an antidote, and is left in peace in a wooden box where he starts waking up after about ten minutes. Dr Jago keeps him under observation for another couple of hours to make sure all is fine, before he is released.

Welfare and conservation



"It went very well. Probably the best it has ever gone," says Jago, who can relax for the first time in three days after all the cats have been released. "It is very important that the cheetahs are not stressed, and that they have woken up well. Each year we improve, and this time the weather was favourable." Jago, who spends 80 per cent of his time on farm animals and domestic pets, says he has always enjoyed working with wildlife. "I like being involved with Africat

because I think it is a worthwhile project." He agrees with the organisation's aim of finding solutions to the conflict between predators and farmers, and feels the education and research arms of the project are very important. "I'd like to see it grow in the future in all spheres, including the animal welfare side of it." He emphasises that only injured and orphaned animals should be kept in captivity. As chairperson of the well-established Large Carnivore Management Association, he hopes to minimise the number of wild carnivores placed in captivity.

The welfare side is Conradie's soft spot by her own admission, but after almost eight years with the organisation, her focus is on ensuring a balance between farmers' issues, conservation, research and welfare. Not everybody would agree with her that it was possible, but she believes strongly that all four are interdependent. "Welfare, which does not mean taking animals out of the wild and putting them in small cages, raises funds and provides opportunities for research (such as the annual health examination), conservation and education," she explains. The welfare programme also brings her in contact with farmers, which help to further the goal of promoting tolerance of large carnivores among farming communities.

While Tintin is eager to get out of the box as Houghton places him in a holding camp, he has no idea of the complexities facing his species and their future survival. It could only be hoped that through the dedication and hard work of animal charities like Africat and other organisations, the long-term survival of large carnivores would be guaranteed. For now, Tintin has no worries. He has enjoyed the luxury of expert medical attention, and would surely not to be waking up with the worst hangover ever.... but to a life filled with many more adventures.

INTERESTING FACTS

- Namibia is home to approximately 25 per cent of the world's cheetah population, of which 90 per cent live on farmland. There is no up-to-date population figure, but a 1987 estimate was between 2,500 to 3,000.
- The cheetah is listed on Appendix I of the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) as an endangered species.
- Cheetahs can reach a top speed of between 100 and 115 km/h which they can maintain over a distance of 300 to 600 metres.
- Of the 809 cheetahs and leopards that have been through Africat over the last eleven years, 83.8 per cent rescued from traps were released or relocated; 3.9 per cent have died or had to be euthanased; and 12.3 per cent (mainly orphans) remained in the care of Africat.
- Africat started a Cheetah Rehabilitation Programme in November 2000 to give orphans with no previous hunting experience an opportunity to act on their inherent instincts and perfect their hunting skills. The cheetahs are radio-collared and released into a 4,000 hectare area which contains a variety of game species. The objective is to relocate them to private game reserves, once they have proved that they can hunt for themselves.
- Africat feeds over 100 cheetahs, leopards, lions and caracals. This requires 8.5 tons of meat, chicken and Iams cat food every month.

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