



## Khayam's LEGACY

Sue Watt talks to renowned conservationist Dr Laurie Marker about her life's work to protect cheetahs — which all started with a cub born in the USA

At the turn of the 20th century some 100,000 cheetahs roamed across Africa. Today, around only 7500 survive and there are concerns that the world's fastest land mammal — capable of speeds up to 70mph — is running headlong towards extinction, facing threats which include habitat loss, human-wildlife conflict and high demand as captive pets from the insidious illegal wildlife trade.

### EARLY DAYS

Dr Laurie Marker first became involved with the big cats

in the 1970s, while working as a veterinary technician at Wildlife Safari in Oregon, USA.

"The cheetahs came under my care, and I discovered nobody really knew anything about this amazing animal," she told me during a fundraising trip to London. "People just said 'they don't have a long lifespan, they don't breed well in captivity and we're losing them in the wild'."

Khayam was born in Oregon on 4 December 1976 and Laurie raised her from a cub. "In 1977, I took her to Namibia to research whether a captive-born cheetah could learn to hunt. That's when I found out farmers were killing hundreds of the cats a year as vermin. They knew nothing about them, but they perceived them as a threat to their livestock."

On their return to the USA, Khayam became the first animal ambassador, travelling around the country with Laurie to raise awareness of the threats facing her species. "I still think of Khayam and talk about her often," Laurie said. "If I hadn't raised her and brought her with me to Africa, the world might never have learned what was happening to cheetahs."

Namibia's vast open landscapes are the perfect habitat for these far-ranging predators, but during the 1980s research proved that some 7000 cheetahs — half of the country's population — had been killed by farmers. In 1990, when the country gained independence, Laurie moved there, founding the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) near the Waterberg Plateau.

### NAMIBIA'S COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

The involvement of local people was critical to CCF's success. "Farmers had already heard about me — I was that crazy American lady who'd brought a cheetah over in the 1970s and successfully taught it to hunt," she said. "We wanted to learn about their problems and they asked us to do training programmes on livestock farming and wildlife management. I grew up on a farm and had done the Future Farmers of America programme, so we developed Future Farmers of Africa (FFA) using that as the model."

CCF's Research and Education Centre became the hub for its work, with over 10,000 farmers benefitting from FFA training, helping to protect their livestock and the cheetahs. CCF also worked closely with the Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) initiative to establish community conservancies with conservation at their core.

"Most of Namibia's wildlife lives outside protected areas and the idea was to see Africa living in harmony with nature. It's a real balance, where you manage your landscape, protect your livestock and share your land with wildlife. That wildlife then brings benefits like ecotourism and a healthier biodiversity. That's why the world comes to Africa; its tourism dollars helping us take care of our wildlife for the future."

### TURNING TO TOURISM

In 2000 CCF opened a visitor centre, which is now

a thriving tourist destination, with its Cheetah View Lodge and Babson Guest House. Visitors can enjoy tours of the Field Research and Education Centre, watch resident cheetahs at feeding time or on morning runs, and take guided drives around the vast enclosures.

Local university interns learn about hospitality alongside conservation, while CCF's Model Farm introduces farmers to predator-friendly farming methods, alternative income streams and Livestock Guarding Dogs. And its Dancing Goat Creamery supplies goat's milk ice creams and fudge to the Cheetah Café.

"Tourism supports at least a third of our



Dr Laurie Marker launched INTERNATIONAL CHEETAH DAY (4 December) 15 years ago, to honour Khayam

in-country costs. We get 15,000-16,000 visitors a year, which is pretty significant," Laurie confirmed. "I always want tourists to go on safari first and then end with us, so they can understand how research and communities come together to help wildlife survive. When they come to us, they get a feel for how we can make it better."

### SAVING SOMALILAND'S CHEETAHS

In 2018 Laurie spread her focus to Somaliland, where the illegal wildlife

trade is threatening local extinction of cheetahs in the Horn of Africa, where there are just 500 of the animals. Some 300 cubs a year are taken from the wild here, when they're only weeks old, yet 80 per cent die on their journey to become pets on the Arabian Peninsula.

Partnering with the Somaliland Government, CCF set up Cheetah Safe Houses to provide care for rescued animals. In 2023 they established the Cheetah Rescue and Conservation Centre (CRCC) in Geed-Deeble, complete with a vet clinic, laboratory and cub nursery. It's now home

to 100 orphaned cheetahs. "We've done surveys on local people's understanding of cheetahs and asked what they want to do. They say they like wildlife and want to benefit by having it on their land, but they don't know anything about it. So we're putting them through training and bringing in people from Kenya and Namibia who've experience at this," Laurie said.

This August, CCF's Education and Training Centre Complex opened, offering crucial education programmes for farmers, teachers and youth, focussing on land restoration, wildlife management and sustainable livelihoods.

"We're bringing the Namibian model to Somaliland and have just developed two conservancies, where we hope to have ecotourism routes.

Somaliland is beautiful, but right now we're looking at rudimentary adventure travel there, not anything luxury."

I asked if she was optimistic about the future for cheetahs? "Yes. I have to be," she replied. "We know what to do now. We've got to go to scale, working with partners throughout the cheetah's range. Our job now is to water the seeds and tell the world that we can save this species."

Nearly 50 years on from her first journey to Namibia with an orphaned cheetah, Khayam's legacy lives on. "She and I met at exactly the right time and place," Laurie said. "Khayam gave me a vision and showed me the path to help ensure the survival of cheetahs for the future. It's in our hands now. We can make a difference."



Running repairs Dr Marker and team operating on a rescued cheetah in CCF's veterinary clinic in Namibia, after which it is released into a special enclosure



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