

**GLOBAL
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME



LIVE CHEETAHS



Patricia Tricorache and Daniel Stiles

SEPTEMBER 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gathering information on the trade of any illicit goods is a difficult task, and we couldn't have accomplished this report without the valuable input from Endangered Wildlife Trust of South Africa and many others whose names must remain anonymous to protect their identities. We would also like to thank Michele Pfab of the South African CITES Scientific Authority for clarifying the current regulations regarding cheetah export and Julian Rademeyer and the editorial and production staff at GI-TOC for their supervision and hard work to improve the contents and appearance of this report.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patricia Tricorache is an illegal wildlife trade (IWT) expert who began investigating the cheetah trade in 2005 for the Cheetah Conservation Fund. Her research, which covers numbers, routes and drivers for demand and supply, as well as cyber commerce, has brought attention to the much-ignored issue of live cheetah cubs for the trade, and was key to support the inclusion of this trade in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora agenda since 2013. Patricia's fieldwork has led to increased government involvement in combating wildlife trafficking in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Somaliland – a key trafficking route for cheetahs out of eastern Africa. She recently published the largest dataset of identified cases of illegal cheetah trade. Currently, Patricia is an illegal wildlife trafficking research associate at Colorado State University's Natural Resource Ecology Laboratory.

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Cover: The Somaliland authorities have confiscated more than 100 cheetahs in illegal trade since 2011. As they are taken at very young ages, most die shortly after confiscation, while the survivors will require life-long care in captivity. © *Angela Ionica / Cheetah Conservation Fund*.

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BLACK MARKET BRIEFS

This is the second in a series of briefs by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) that examines market dynamics and prices of selected live and derivative products in illegal wildlife trade (IWT). These briefs are intended to present a current snapshot of product supply factors in East and southern Africa, demand levels in consumer countries, the impact on species population numbers and overall conservation status.

These black market briefs will also consider how externalities such as statutory changes, economic conditions or the COVID-19 pandemic might influence market dynamics and prices. Market dynamics include description of the product, supply sources, means of acquisition, identifying the perpetrators, quantities traded, transport methods and routes, and changes in these elements over time.

The value of price studies is that knowledge of current producer, exporter and importer wholesale selling prices, when compared to historical prices, provides insights on levels of demand, which can predict

direction of trend in illegal off-take. Retail prices of processed wildlife products are much less useful as there are too many variables to control that influence price, including quality, unknown quantity (as in medicinal products), location sold (street or online price is much lower for the identical product than in a luxury boutique or auction house), socio-economic status of the buyer and so on.

Price data of IWT products is difficult to collect accurately because of the covert nature of the market and the supply chains that feed it. There is no complete data for all points in the trade chain, from supply origin through the transport stages (which usually involve different middlemen) to the final destination country, processing point and distribution to consumers. Product supply can also derive from multiple types of sources (for example, wild or captive bred, field poached or legal stockpile leakage) that also influence the producer price at the beginning of the trade chain, which has knock-on effects at different points along the trade chain.¹

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
CTD	CITES Trade Database
ICSB	International Cheetah Studbook
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
IWT	illegal wildlife trade



OVERVIEW

Wild cheetah populations are in net decline, and if the current rate of trade persists, the species is headed for virtual extinction. Approximately 300 cheetahs a year are smuggled out of East Africa and the Horn – the main supply area – mainly as pets for the palatial residences of royal families and the wealthy in the Middle East. Given that there are only 7 000 cheetahs left in the wild, this represents an annual loss of over 4% of the population. High profits drive the trade: a healthy, tame cheetah cub can command up to US\$30 000 at the end of the trade chain, while the poacher in Somalia might gain 1% of that.

A few countries allow the legal export of cheetahs, mainly in southern Africa, but there are irregularities in the system. Trade records show that about 900 cheetahs were legally exported from southern Africa between 2010 and 2019, with two-thirds of them (596) from South Africa. Almost all were reported as captive bred, but some exporters were not registered captive breeding facilities, making them ineligible to export cheetahs for commercial purposes, according to the regulations of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). There is also the possibility that some cheetahs are being taken illegally from the wild and 'laundered' through legal captive breeding facilities with the addition of microchips and fake documentation.

▲ Cheetahs are mainly traded to serve as pets for royal and wealthy families in the Middle East. © Getty Images

If the current rate of trade in cheetahs persists, the species is headed for extinction.

The live cheetah trade systems, methods and trade chains display fundamental differences between southern Africa and East Africa/the Horn. Southern Africa is largely a regulated legal system in the key exporting country (South Africa) based on captive breeding, while East Africa/the Horn is an unregulated illegal trade system involving capture in the wild and smuggling. These basic differences result in somewhat different trade chain structures, actors within them, methods of supply and prices at the different points.

COVID-19 transport and live animal import restrictions in key markets have reduced exports from southern Africa, while smugglings exports by sea from the Horn have shown an increase.

Black market cheetah prices

There is no evidence that COVID-19 transport restrictions and interruptions of market supply by road and air in eastern and southern Africa have affected black market export prices of live cheetahs, but this is because of a lack of relevant data.

There have been no cheetah trafficking cases detected in the COVID-19 period in southern Africa,² and in eastern Africa there are no 2016–2019 export prices known with which to compare to 2020 known export prices. The poacher and middleman prices seem to have remained stable in the key supply area of the Horn.

Key points

- More than 4 000 wild cheetahs have been recorded in illegal trade incidents since 2010, leaving the wild population at less than 7 000. Of these incidents, 87% were of live animals, while 13% involved parts or derivatives of cheetahs.
- The main supply area of wild cheetahs is East Africa and the Horn.
- South Africa supplies primarily zoos and safari parks from captive cheetah facilities, but irregularities have been found.
- The principal uses of cheetahs are as exotic pets in the Middle East and as zoo/wildlife park attractions around the world, particularly in East and South East Asia.
- Between March 2020 and February 2021, cheetah trafficking out of the Horn to Yemen increased 58% over the previous 12 months given the relative ease to transport them by boat during the pandemic, while other species usually transported by air were grounded during COVID-19 lockdowns.
- Prices for cheetahs remain stable in spite of bans on live animal imports in key demand markets such as China.



MARKET SUPPLY

Cheetahs are one of the most endangered big cat species in the world today, with approximately 7 000 left in the wild, down from 14 000 in 1975. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List classifies the cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) as 'Vulnerable', with the population decreasing.³ Habitat loss is the biggest threat – cheetahs need huge areas of range with suitable prey to survive – but the illegal capture of cheetah cubs in the wild for the pet trade or for private zoos is also a serious problem, and one that appears to be getting worse.⁴ One of the drivers behind this trend is the fact that the global captive cheetah population is not self-sustaining as the animals breed poorly in captivity, resulting in wild cheetahs being caught to supplement numbers.

Since 1975, cheetahs have been listed under Appendix I of CITES, which means that trade in cheetahs 'must be subject to particularly strict regulation and authorized only in exceptional circumstances'. With the exception of two CITES-registered facilities, cheetahs cannot be traded for 'primarily commercial purposes'. Confusingly, 'commercial purposes' does not refer to the nature of the transaction – cheetahs can be sold commercially, i.e., for money – but to the 'intended use' of the specimen in the country of import. CITES defines 'commercial purpose' as an activity for obtaining 'economic benefit (whether in cash or otherwise), and is directed toward resale, exchange, provision of a service or any other form of economic use or benefit'.⁵

The burden of proof to demonstrate that the trade is non-commercial in purpose rests with the importing party, which can be difficult to determine. For example, a registered breeding facility in South Africa could sell cheetah cubs to a registered private zoo in East Asia for 'educational' – i.e. non-commercial – purposes,

▲
The illegal capture of cheetah cubs in the wild poses a serious threat for the species.

© Patricia Tricorache



Cheetahs are one of the most sought-after exotic pets for the show-off rich, threatening their survival in the wild.

© Daniel Stiles

yet the zoo might charge visitors money to hold and have their photographs taken with the cubs and call it an educational activity. Is this commercial or non-commercial? Is it educational for the visitors?

International legal trade in live cheetahs involves wild, ranched and captive-bred specimens for zoos, captive breeders, educational or training facilities, re-introductions to the wild and, with some exceptions, for personal purposes. Only facilities registered with CITES can trade captive-bred cheetahs for commercial purposes, using source code D ('Appendix-I specimens bred in captivity for commercial purposes').⁶

In 2020, the South Africa CITES Scientific Authority approved an updated non-detriment finding for cheetahs. The finding⁷ in respect of captive-bred cheetah specimens is as follows:

The export of captive-bred specimens will not have a detrimental impact on the wild population, provided that all specimens are verified as

captive-bred (as defined in CITES Resolution Conf. 10.16 (Rev.)) prior to export through DNA parentage analyses. All cheetah breeding facilities exporting internationally must also be registered with the Management Authority in compliance with the *Threatened or Protected Species* and CITES regulations, and in accordance with criteria approved by the Scientific Authority, which should include at least the following:

- i. All cheetah must be recorded in a studbook that keeps records of dates of births and deaths, translocations and sales.
- ii. All cheetah must be individually identifiable through identification photographs, microchips and DNA fingerprints.

But as this report will highlight, it is not uncommon for these criteria to be subverted or ignored for purposes of dubious export.

Location, number of cheetahs and potential supply to market

Southern Africa

Southern Africa⁸ houses the largest populations of wild cheetahs, with about 4 300 adult and adolescent individuals in total.⁹ The main threat to cheetahs within the region is poorly regulated and illegal national and international trade. CITES allows legal trade in captive live animals and hunting trophies under an Appendix I quota system in southern Africa, but this system has also been abused in the shape of laundering wild animals into the legal supply.

Eastern Africa

The wild cheetah population in East Africa/the Horn is estimated at 2 290 adult and adolescent individuals.¹⁰ Within those populations, the animals most vulnerable to trafficking are in the Ogaden region in eastern Ethiopia, northern Kenya and Somaliland, a self-declared autonomous region of Somalia. Population numbers are largely unknown in those areas, but data from cheetah seizures, as well as a recent survey in Somaliland, suggests cheetah presence in the region.¹¹ Furthermore, the locations of recorded incidents suggest that wild cheetahs are being removed from these areas.¹²

Cheetah supply source and quantity to market

The primary illegal cheetah supply areas are South Africa and East Africa, including the Horn. The two areas employ different methods for supply: South Africa primarily utilizes various types of captive breeding facilities for ostensibly legal export, while East Africa/the Horn collect cubs in the wild for subsequent smuggling, with no pretence of legality. A secondary area of lesser importance is Sudan and South Sudan, which tends to send captured cheetahs to Cairo, Egypt.¹³

A recent 10-year study undertaken in collaboration with the Cheetah Conservation Fund found that over 3 600 live cheetahs have been involved in illegal trade incidents since 2010, most of them originating in East Africa and the Horn. Approximately 500 cheetahs were also killed to supply skins and other body parts for trade.¹⁴ The study estimated that around 300 cheetahs are smuggled out of East Africa and the Horn every year, most of them going to Gulf countries.

The report assessed 56 countries, 15 of which are cheetah range countries assumed to play the role of source or transit countries, with Somaliland (42.4%), Kenya (12.7%) and Ethiopia (10.2%) being the most represented in terms of cheetah units. The remaining 41 countries are non-cheetah range countries that are considered transit or destination countries, with Saudi Arabia (60.5%), Kuwait (14.2%) and the UAE (13.7%) being the most represented. South Africa was involved in only 1.9% of worldwide cases, many of them involving parts sold in open markets.

The study found 528 sellers involving 2 298 cheetahs suspected of being sourced from the wild, which underscores the importance of online platforms in IWT. Advertisements were found on social media (88.4%), e-commerce (7.9%) and mobile phone apps (3.7%). Instagram made up 75% of the posts.

Around 300 cheetahs are smuggled out of East Africa and the Horn every year, most of them going to Gulf countries.

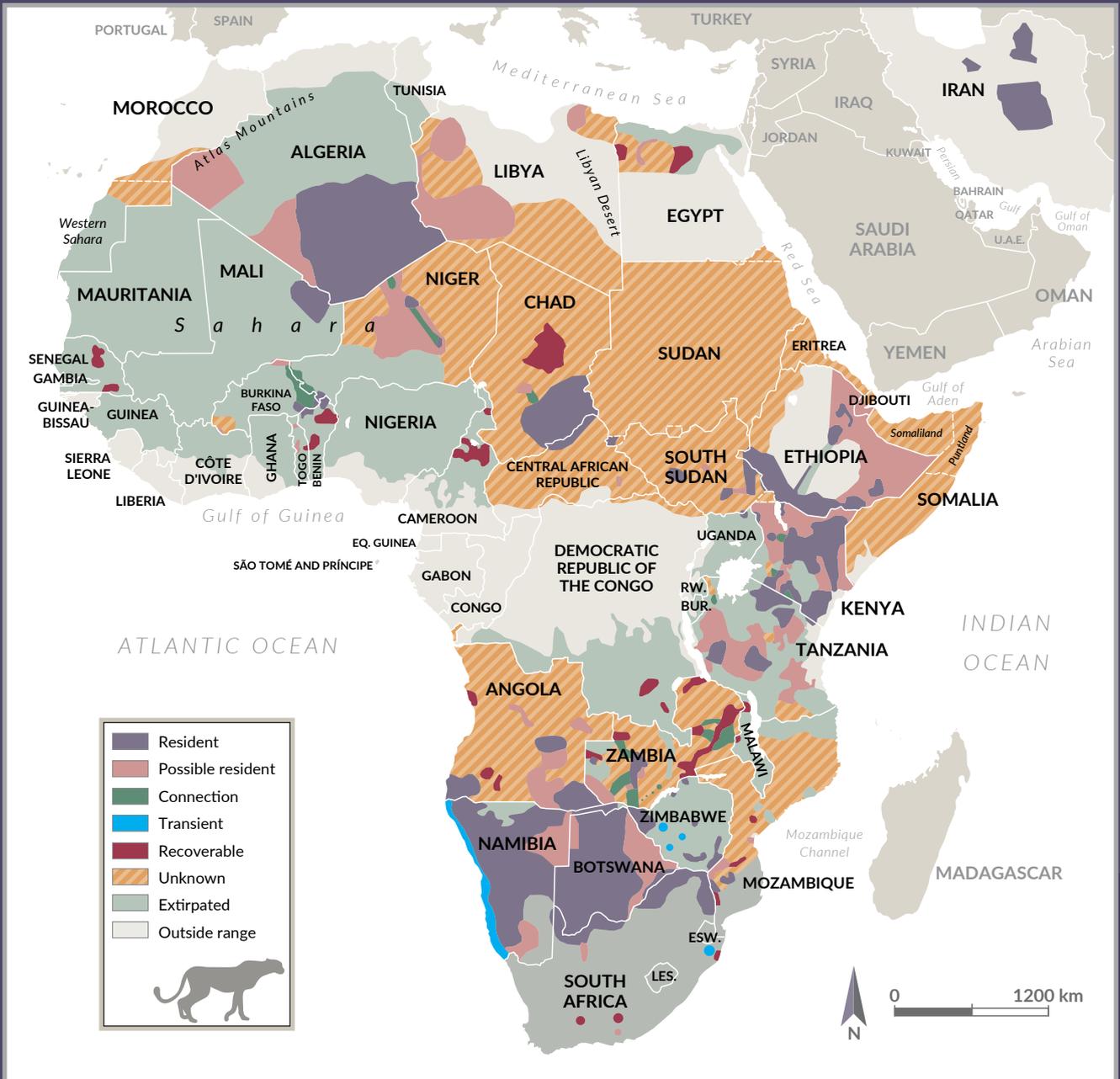


FIGURE 1 Cheetahs roamed across south Asia and Africa in the early 1900s. Today, their range has been reduced by over 90%, residing mostly in southern and east Africa.

SOURCE: IUCN Red List, 2015, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2015-4.RLTS.T219A50649567.en>

Southern Africa

According to the CITES Trade Database (CTD), South Africa is the largest legal live cheetah exporter in the world, accounting for two-thirds (596) of the 897 cheetahs traded by 36 countries from 2010 through 2019 (Figure 2). Of these cheetahs, 94% were source-coded as captive bred and the remaining 6% as wild or ranched cheetahs.¹⁵ In addition to exports, an estimated 600 cheetahs are held in about 80 facilities in the country,¹⁶ many of which offer animal interactions or cub petting.¹⁷

South Africa hosts the only two CITES-registered facilities worldwide that can trade cheetahs for commercial purposes. In addition to these, 16 other facilities in the country have reported captive births to the International Cheetah Studbook (ICSB),¹⁸ but these facilities can only trade cheetahs for non-commercial purposes.

However, most facilities cannot trace individual animals and the CITES permit system is ineffective in monitoring the movement of animals between facilities and out of the country. South Africa’s Regulations Concerning the Private Possession of Big Cats require that wildlife traders and captive facilities be registered, but many cheetah exports have come from unregistered facilities, and provincial authorities cannot confidently say the exports are captive bred rather than wild. (Only 27% of South Africa’s exports listed in the CTD were found in the ICSB.¹⁹)

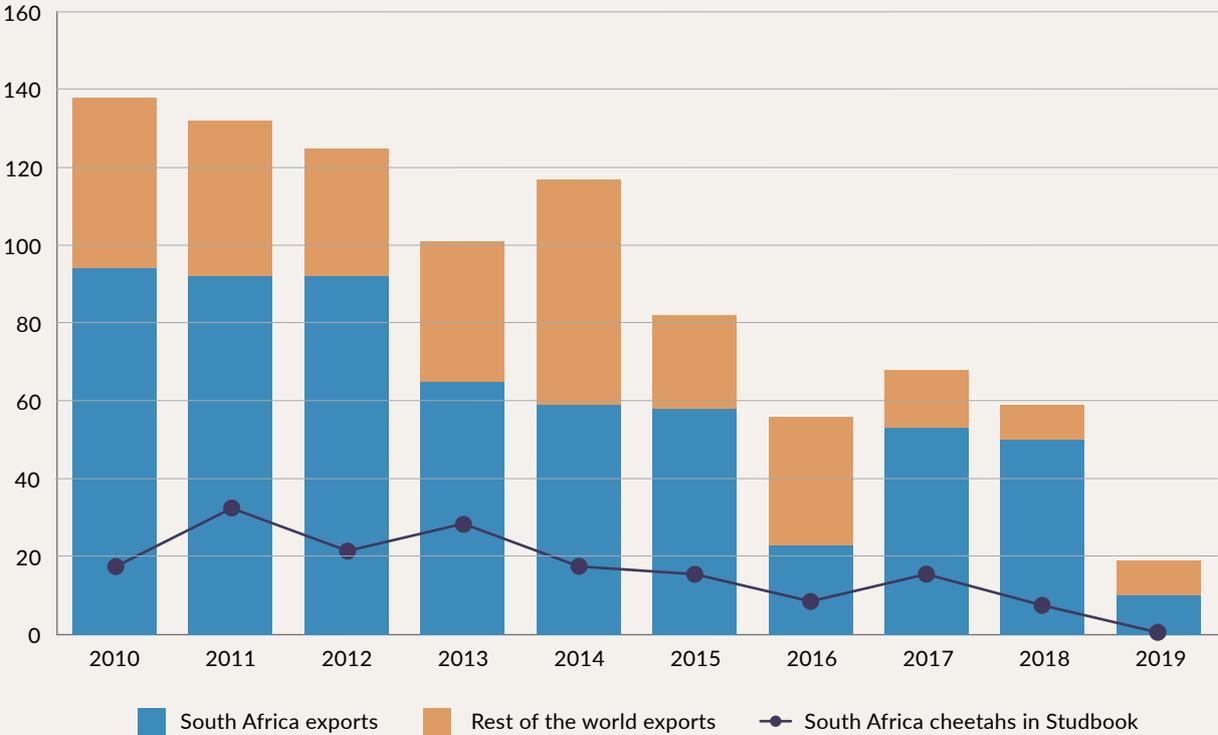


FIGURE 2 Number of cheetahs exported by South Africa and reported to the International Cheetah Studbook compared to rest of the world exports, 2010–2019.

SOURCES: CITES Trade Database and International Cheetah Studbook, 2019.



Microchips can be inserted into wild-caught cheetahs in captive breeding facilities to make them appear legal.

© Jessica Martin/Cheetah Conservation Fund

Due to the relative ease of introducing wild-caught individuals into the captive system, some of South Africa's facilities may be conduits for illegal cheetah smuggling from across the region.²⁰ Reports indicate that cheetahs are removed from free-roaming populations throughout the region and from protected areas, such as Kruger National Park, for captive breeding or tourism operations.²¹ South Africa's regulations require that wildlife traders and captive facilities demonstrate their preparedness to microchip or mark specimens.²² However, most forms of identification – such as papers and tags – are easy to fake,²³ and microchips can be implanted into wild-caught cheetahs.²⁴ Only one seizure has been recorded of a live cheetah lacking a microchip, at London Heathrow, with the animal in transit from South Africa to Russia.²⁵

Traffickers in Russia itself may be involved in illegal transit operations of South African cheetahs. The CTD reports one incident in 2012 of six cheetahs originating from South Africa being re-exported by Russia to Ukraine for a travelling circus (purpose code Q). In 2013 a further 10 cheetahs from South Africa were exported through Russia to Kazakhstan, and in 2016 another six cheetahs imported by Russia from South Africa were re-exported to Azerbaijan for a travelling circus. None of these cheetahs are reported to have returned to Russia, as is required under purpose code Q.²⁶ Where are those 22 cheetahs now? Similar situations have been identified in connection with great apes from central and West African countries.²⁷

For the rest of southern Africa, 15 live wild cheetahs were legally exported during the same period, from Namibia (10 cheetahs to Cuba and one to Argentina) and Zimbabwe (four to Zambia). Namibia and Zimbabwe have CITES-authorized export quotas for live wild cheetahs and trophies of 150 and 50 each, respectively.²⁸ All reported that zoos were the intended use (Z purpose code).

Data on illegal trade in connection with southern Africa is scarce, but of the 31 incidents involving at least 55 live cheetahs detected between 2010 and 2019, 19 took place in South Africa or near its border (Figure 4).²⁹ This agrees with reports of cheetahs being removed illegally from free-roaming populations in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa.³⁰

Thirty cheetahs were reported as having been seized in 18 incidents: 18 cheetahs in South Africa,³¹ five in Namibia, four in Botswana, two in Zimbabwe and one in the United Kingdom (the Heathrow seizure above).³² At least four of the seizures took place at or near border crossings between Botswana and South Africa, although the direction was not specified.

Seventeen southern African cheetahs were offered for sale: 11 out of South Africa (three via online marketplaces, seven by an unpermitted captive facility and one king cheetah captured live in South Africa being sold by a breeder); and six by a dealer in Pakistan. In other incidents, seven were surrendered pets in Namibia; one was reported by an airline pilot flying to Dubai who had doubts about the legality of this transport;³³ and an unknown number of 'found' cubs reported by an individual seeking to place them in Namibia.³⁴ The last two cases were not confirmed.³⁵ Figure 3 summarizes the types of illegal trade incidents recorded in southern Africa between 2010 and 2020. There were no recorded illegal cheetah trade incidents in 2020 in southern Africa.

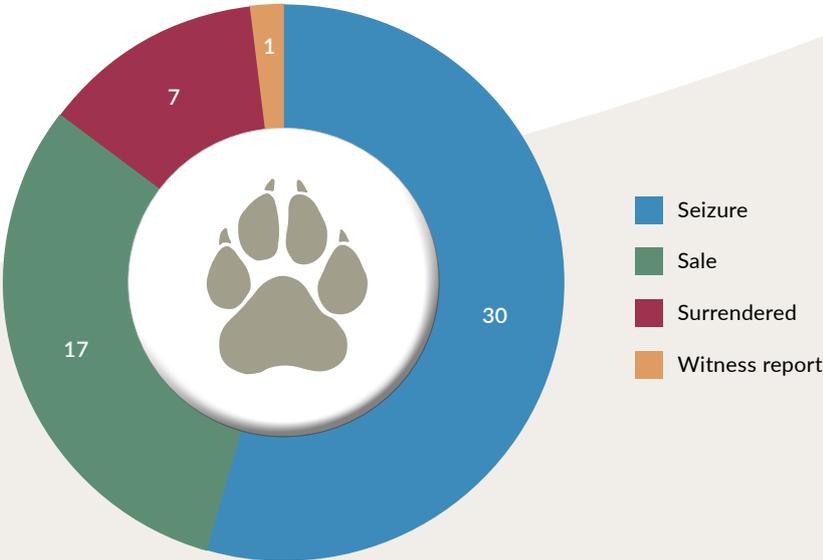


FIGURE 3 Number of cheetahs in illegal trade incidents in southern Africa, 2010-2020.

SOURCE: Patricia Tricorache, Shira Yashphe and Laurie Marker, Global dataset for seized and non-intercepted illegal cheetah trade (*Acinonyx jubatus*) 2010-2019, *Data in Brief*, 35, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dib.2021.106848>

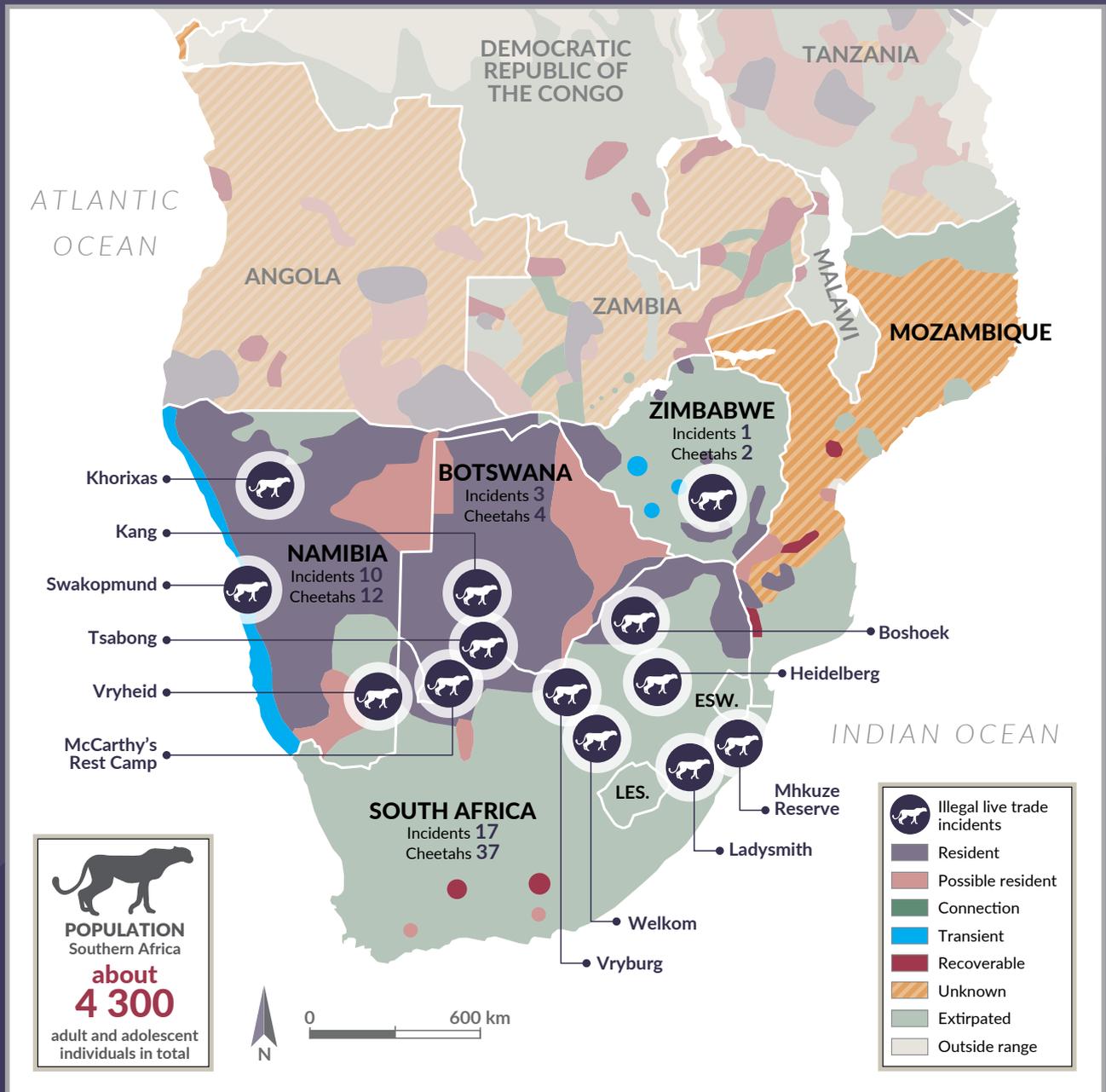


FIGURE 4 Status of cheetah populations in southern Africa and approximate locations of known illegal live cheetah trade incidents, 2010–2020.

NOTE: South Africa: 17; Namibia: 10; Botswana: 3; Zimbabwe: 1.

SOURCE: Patricia Tricorache, Shira Yashphe and Laurie Marker, Global dataset for seized and non-intercepted illegal cheetah trade (*Acinonyx jubatus*) 2010–2019, *Data in Brief*, 35, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dib.2021.106848>; Range Wide Conservation Program for Cheetah and African Wild Dog

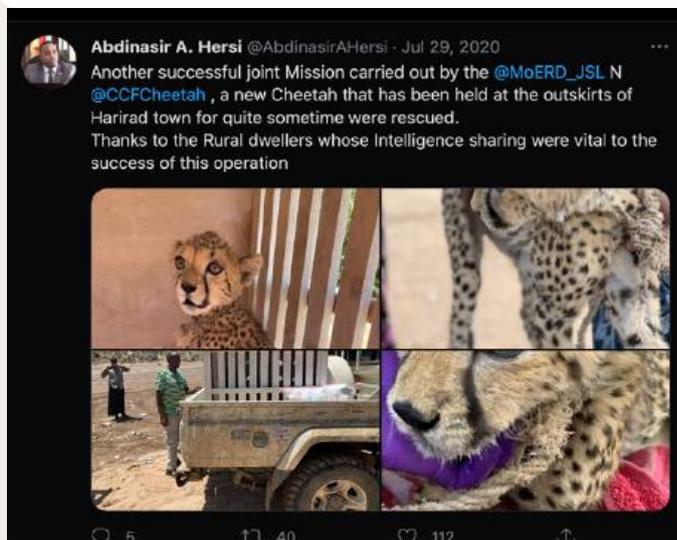
Eastern Africa

Data suggests that eastern Africa is the main source of cheetahs destined for the illegal pet trade in the Arabian Peninsula, where exotic animals are regarded as status symbols. Cheetahs, considered the least aggressive of the big cats, are favoured as pets and are often seen in videos playing with children in palatial residences or being exhibited in cars or on boats, with young cubs being the most sought after.

During the period 2010–2020, seven incidents involving 11 live cheetahs were recorded in the range states of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, including nine cheetahs seized in five incidents (Figure 5). Djibouti, considered a transit route into the Arabian Peninsula, registered two incidents involving six confiscated specimens. In contrast, there were 194 incidents involving 767 live cheetahs in Ethiopia, Somalia and Somaliland, including 262 cheetahs in 65 confiscations (Figure 6).

A closer look at the data clearly shows the primacy of Somaliland and Ethiopia as source and transit areas for cheetahs being smuggled to the Arabian Peninsula. Over 70% of the incidents (142) were recorded in Somaliland, involving at least 532 live cheetahs, including 217 cheetahs in 55 confiscations and over 300 that disappeared during investigations, assumed either to have died or been trafficked (Figure 7). At least 20% of the cheetahs seized or investigated in Somaliland were located at or within 50 kilometres of the border with Ethiopia, while an additional 27% were located in Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, which lies on the shortest route between Ethiopia and the Gulf of Aden, besides Djibouti.³⁶

While difficult to estimate, it is thought that over 60% of cheetah cubs die before they reach the market to be sold.



A successful cheetah rescue mission in Harirad, Somaliland, July 2020. Photos: MoERD/Twitter



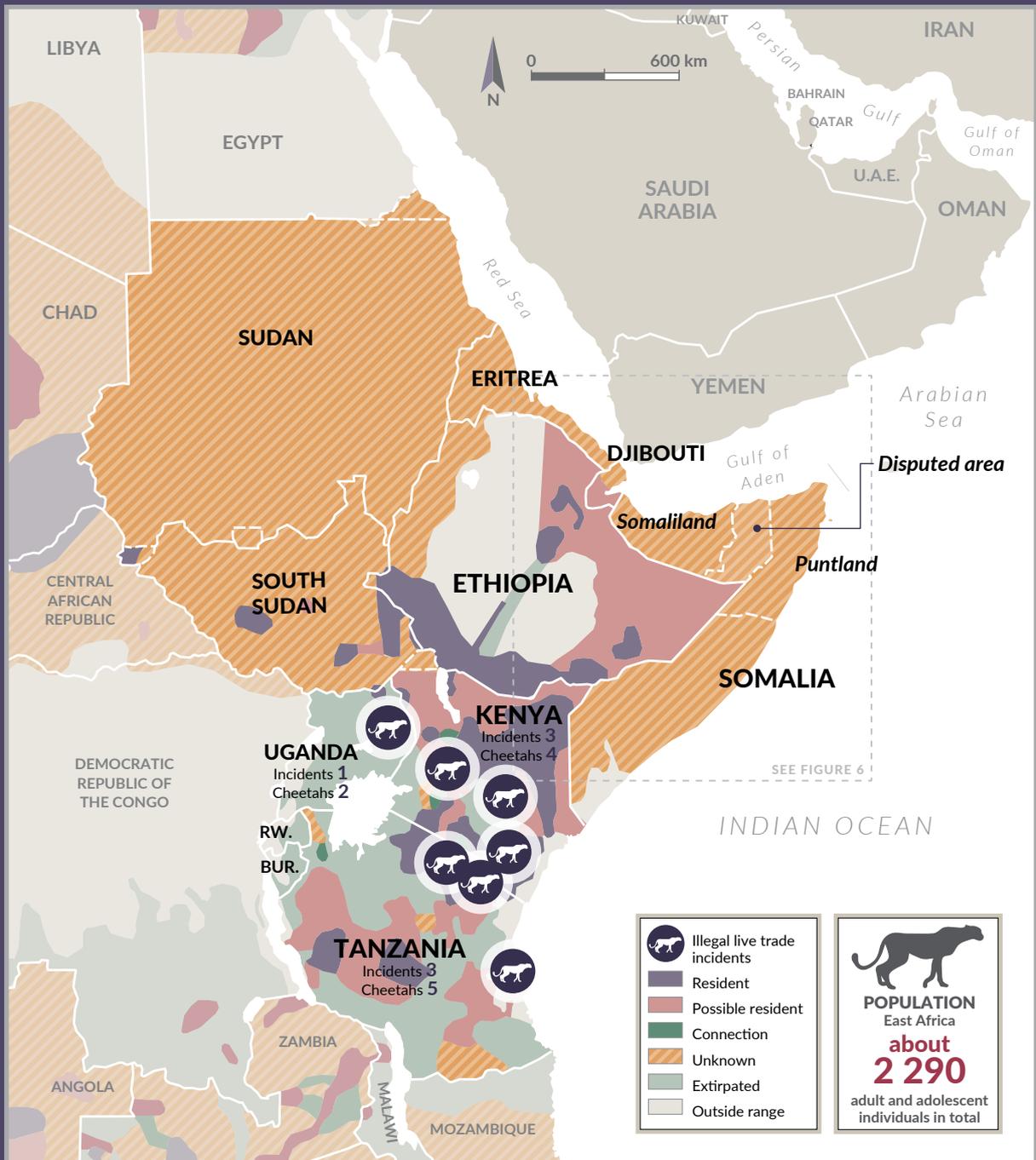


FIGURE 5 Status of cheetah populations in eastern Africa and approximate locations of illegal live cheetah trade incidents in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

NOTE: Data for 2010–2020.

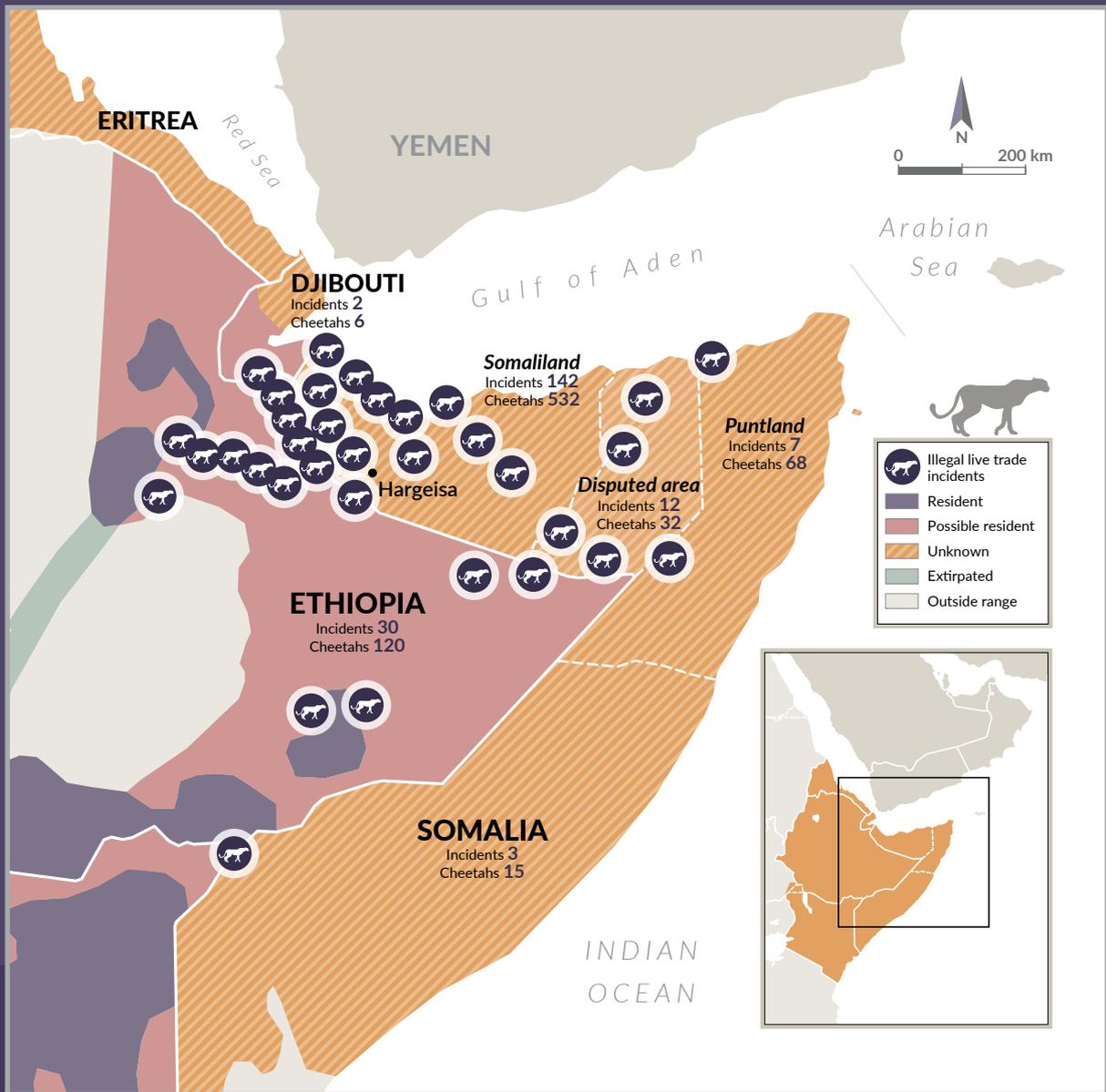


FIGURE 6 Illegal live cheetah trade incidents in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia and Somaliland, 2010–2020.

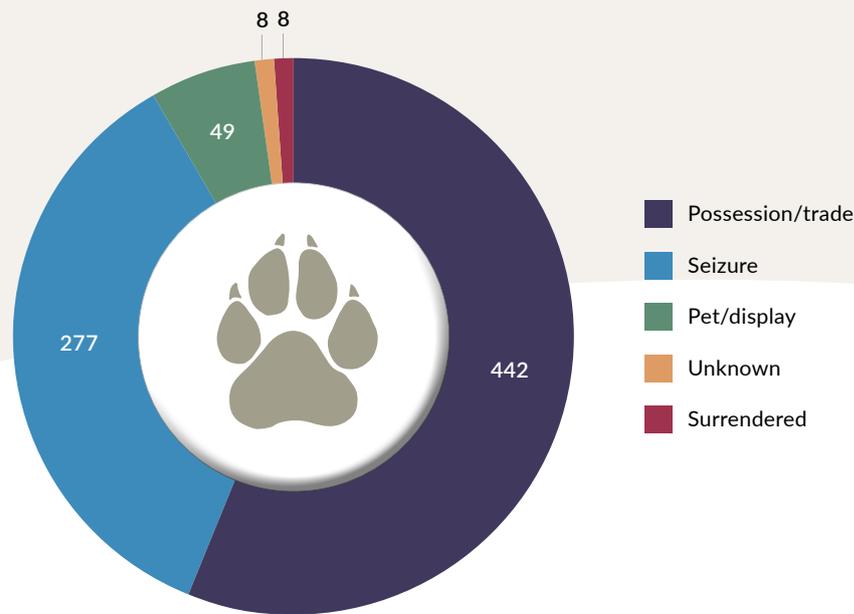


FIGURE 7 Number of cheetahs in illegal trade incidents in eastern Africa, 2010–2020.

It is important to note, however, that Somaliland has been more extensively researched and its significance as a trafficking route into the Middle East might be partly the result of underreporting from other countries. That said, the area's long and undeveloped coast, together with its proximity to Yemen, make it the perfect smuggling route for cheetahs destined for the wealthy consumer markets in the Gulf states.

Socio-economic factors in northern Somalia and Ethiopia may also help drive the supply of cheetahs to the illicit market. The dry, semi-arid areas that form the habitat of cheetahs are occupied primarily by pastoralist and nomadic communities who depend on livestock for their livelihoods. Cheetahs will occasionally prey on young cattle, sheep and goats, which may provide another motivation for illegal trade – getting rid of a costly predator. Cubs left behind would also be a lucrative by-product.³⁷

However, the apparent absence of dead adult females from all but one seizure suggests that cubs are predominately removed from the wild when the mother hides them to go hunting, either opportunistically by herders, or by poachers. Cubs have been recovered as young as two weeks old and generally show signs of maltreatment and poor nutrition. Throughout this ordeal they are usually stored in baskets, small crates, hampers, canisters or cardboard boxes. It is in this manner that they make the long trip towards the coast. While difficult to estimate, it is thought that over 60% of cheetah cubs die before they reach the market to be sold.³⁸ In all likelihood, traffickers elude or bribe their way through police or army checkpoints.

Cheetahs are then shipped by boat along with livestock or other goods to the Yemeni coast (Figure 8). Once in Yemen, they are transported along the paved road running north from the Bab al-Mandeb peninsula to the Saudi region of Jizan,

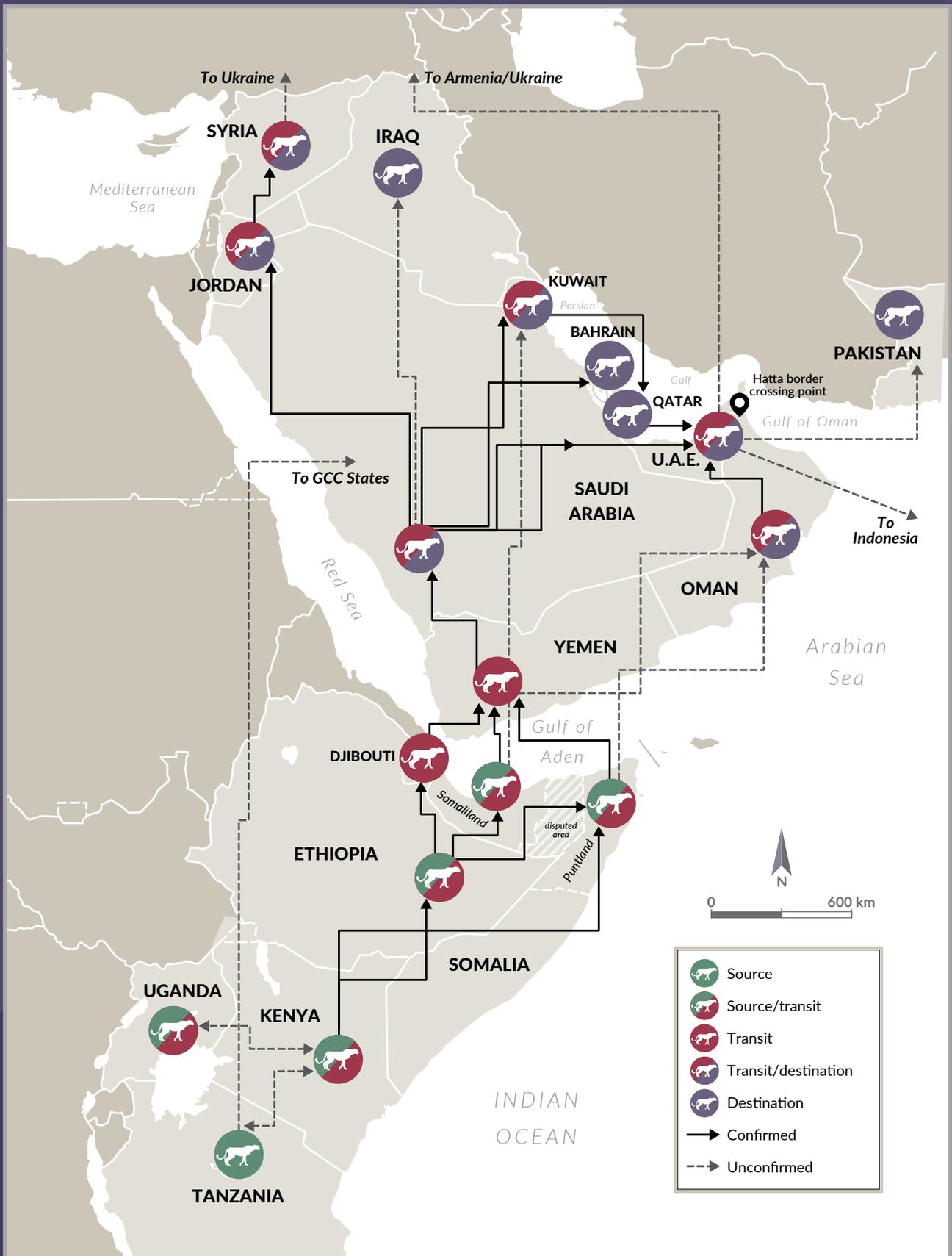


FIGURE 8 Confirmed and unconfirmed cheetah trafficking routes between eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, 2005–2020.



Instagram advertisement offering a Tanzanian cheetah for sale in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2016. © Instagram

where they are delivered to Saudi dealers. The road runs along desolate areas with no water, electricity or deep water for container ships, thus appearing to serve mostly to transport illicit goods. Vehicle drivers have been observed handing money to police at checkpoints.³⁹

Saudi dealers then offer the animals to buyers in the Gulf states through e-commerce, social media platforms (such as Instagram and Snapchat) or through WhatsApp chat groups. Nearly 2 500 cheetahs have been offered for sale online between 2010 and 2020, with most accounts originating in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait.⁴⁰

Cheetahs have reportedly entered the UAE from Oman through the Hatta border post, but it is not known whether they entered Oman through Yemen or by sea from Somalia. The Hatta border has often been mentioned as a transit point for illegal animals which have entered Oman by air or land.⁴¹

Unconfirmed but credible reports also include cheetahs being transported from Somaliland or Tanzania on private jets to the Gulf states. Attempts to investigate a Kuwaiti private jet often seen in Somaliland have failed to ascertain the owner's identity. Similarly, there are online advertisements offering cheetahs specifically from Tanzania.

Smuggling between Kenya and Uganda or Tanzania is suspected.⁴² In 2015, a pair of three-month-old cubs intended for sale were confiscated in north-east Uganda within 100 kilometres of the Kenyan border.

A number of wild animal traders are also known to operate in Egypt, and seven trafficking incidents in Egypt involving 16 live cheetahs have been recorded, including one seizure of two cheetahs.⁴³ An animal dealer in Cairo claimed on social media that he maintained a cheetah holding facility in Khartoum, Sudan.⁴⁴

Data from the CTD and information collected through direct interviews and investigative reports also suggest that cheetahs with potentially questionable documentation may have been shipped from the Middle East into countries in Europe and South East Asia. In 2015, two cheetahs were exported from Bahrain to Armenia with a CITES permit indicating that they were captive bred, although there are no known captive breeding facilities in Bahrain. The same cheetahs appeared on the CTD as having been re-exported to Russia the same year for breeding purposes. However, an investigative report indicates that the cats were shipped to a health resort in the Ukraine that has no connections with zoos or breeding facilities.⁴⁵ Armenia also imported 10 captive bred cheetahs from the UAE in 2016, although their destination remains unknown.⁴⁶

Live cheetah prices

Southern Africa

Information on illegal trade prices in southern Africa is not widely available. Due to the presumed ability of introducing wild-caught cheetahs into legal captive breeding operations, all illegal removals appear to supply local breeders or captive facilities. There is no evidence of southern African wild cheetahs being exported illegally without being first laundered in a breeding facility.⁴⁷ Figure 9 shows recent prices at stages of the illegal trade chain for wild-caught cheetahs in southern Africa.

Prices for international buyers generally involve legal transactions at US\$20 000 to US\$25 000 per individual cheetah, plus permits and transportation expenses, while locally, a cheetah can sell for US\$15 000 between captive breeding facilities and commercial zoos or safari parks.⁴⁸ The king cheetah, a product of a genetic mutation, can fetch between US\$90 000 and US\$120 000 in South Africa.⁴⁹ In the UAE, a tame king cheetah can cost up to US\$1 million, while an untamed one can sell for as low as US\$135 000.⁵⁰

Trade levels	Age/Type	Price US\$
Poacher/harvester	Any	150
1st middleman	Any	300
2nd middleman	Any	1 800
Wholesaler*	Any	3 000

*Selling to a private zoo or breeding operation (sometimes the facility is both).

FIGURE 9 Average wild-caught cheetah prices in southern Africa, August 2020.

NOTE: Not all trade levels are necessarily present with each traded cheetah.

Eastern Africa

Comparing the East Africa/Horn poached live cheetah prices with those in the Arabian Peninsula illustrates the financial incentives that help drive the trade. Important factors that determine prices are the cheetah's health, age and disposition.⁵¹ Other aspects include who makes the delivery and where. Figure 10 shows the prices recently and in the past.⁵²

Period	Poacher (Ethiopia/Somalia/ Somaliland)	Middleman (Somalia/ Somaliland)	Exporter (Somalia/ Somaliland)	Importer selling (Yemen/Saudi Arabia)	Middleman to consumer (Saudi Arabia/UAE)
2010–2015	256 (80–500)	1 100 (700–1 500)	2 753 (135–5 400)	6 642 (1 890–7 965)	10 385 (2 700–27 000)
2016–2020	294 (100–500)	1 490 (700–2 500)	3 958 (3 000–5 000)	6 446 (1 998–8 100)	10 868 (6 750–30 000)*

*One price of US\$50 000 of a cheetah sold in Iran was not used.

FIGURE 10 Average prices for live cheetahs in East Africa/Horn supply countries and in the Arabian Peninsula, 2010–2020.

NOTE: In US\$, with range in parentheses.

Additionally, delivery prices from Yemen were quoted during negotiations at US\$5 000 to Saudi Arabia and US\$10 000 to the UAE. An online seller in Saudi Arabia quoted US\$5 000 for deliveries to Kuwait.

The range of prices at each point in the trade chain is quite wide, indicated in parentheses in the table. For 'exporter', there are only 10 very variable prices for the period 2010–2015, and four less variable prices for the period 2016–2020 (all in 2020), so the apparent rise in export price might be due more to sampling bias than an actual increase.

A cheetah delivered to the Yemeni coast can be sold from the boat for US\$3 000 and sold on by the importer for US\$8 100 at or across the border at Jizan, Saudi Arabia. Importantly, prices vary when the transit seller offers cheetahs to end buyers: in late 2015, for example, a seller at the Yemen–Saudi Arabia border offered a cheetah cub for US\$540, although the condition of the animal is not known. In late 2020 cubs were offered out of Yemen to end buyers for US\$13 500 each. At the importer-selling level, recent prices begin at US\$2 000 and can go as high as US\$8 100, depending on who the buyer is (for example, a consumer in Saudi Arabia or end buyers in Kuwait or the UAE). Saudi middlemen selling to an end consumer can achieve prices as high as US\$30 000, although this is rare.

Prices outside of the Arabian Peninsula seem higher. In April 2017, a known exotic animal dealer in Indonesia offered a small cheetah cub of unknown origin for sale on Instagram for approximately US\$50 000. In December 2017 an Asiatic cheetah cub was sold in Iran, also for US\$50 000.⁵³

Comparing the price points in the respective black market trade chains of southern Africa and eastern Africa illustrates clearly the differences between the two trading systems (Figure 11).

Trade point	Southern Africa	Eastern Africa
Poacher	150	300
Middlemen	1 650	1 500
Local end-user	3 000	no data
Exporter	no data	4 000
Importer selling	no data	6 500
Middleman to consumer	no data	11 100

FIGURE 11 Average live cheetah black market prices in southern and eastern Africa, 2016–2020 (US\$).

NOTE: Rounded to the nearest US\$100. The ranges are wide, with many lower and higher prices around each average.

The key difference in the black market trade chains of the subregions occurs at the point of the last middleman. In southern Africa, the last middleman is selling illicitly, most often to a local breeding facility or to a local private zoo/wildlife park. From that point on, the trade chain is no longer black market. If any of these cheetahs or their offspring are exported, they appear to be bred in captivity and therefore legal in export documents. The export average price will be in the US\$20 000–US\$25 000 range – considerably higher than the US\$4 000 average export price from the Horn to Yemen (see Figure 10), illustrating the business incentive for importers to buy black market from the Horn. In eastern Africa, there is no local end user, so the last middleman always sells to an exporter (i.e. smuggler), although there are rare cases known of influential people in the Horn keeping cheetahs as pets.



MARKET DEMAND

▲ Cheetahs are viewed as status symbols in the Gulf states. *Source: Social media*

With the significant drop in tourism and restrictions on import of live wild animals into countries with large commercial zoo/safari park industries (such as China and Thailand) due to COVID-19, it is expected that there will be a temporary reduction in cheetah exports out of South Africa in 2020 and 2021. The CTD and ICSB will provide some of the data once the reports are in and published.

The demand for cheetahs in zoos and safari parks is unlikely to decline, however, unless there is a vigorous demand reduction campaign of the type seen mounted for lions and tigers, and even these seem to have achieved limited results. Market demand for live cheetahs as pets also remains strong, based on the number of recent online advertisements seen and reports of a rise in cheetah-related smuggling activity out of the Horn.⁵⁴ With fewer flights out of Africa and Asia to transport other species due to COVID-19, dealers have increasingly turned to cheetahs, which are smuggled by boat across the Gulf of Aden.

Cheetahs have long been fashionable household pets or hunting companions in the Gulf states, where they are viewed as status symbols. This popularity has been encouraged in recent years by wealthy or famous individuals posing with their exotic pets on social media.⁵⁵ Demand shows no signs of declining.

It is evident that as long as there is buying capacity to pay high prices and a demand for cheetahs in destination countries, compounded by poverty in source/transit countries, lack of inter-regional collaboration, insufficient enforcement of existing laws due to corruption and lack of political will, and low penalties and conviction rates throughout the trafficking routes, the systematic removal of cheetahs from the wild will not stop. This is of particular concern in eastern Africa, where demand has the potential to exhaust current supply and expand into areas of Kenya and Tanzania still perceived as relatively safe for cheetahs.

Routes to market

In southern Africa, there are a few known cases of live cheetahs smuggled from Namibia and Botswana to South Africa, but no seizures are reported at the level of export to foreign markets, therefore there exist in principle no illicit routes to the black market. Since 2010, South African breeding facilities have exported live cheetahs with documentation directly by airfreight to many clients around the world.

Figure 12 provides an overview of trade routes out of eastern Africa and the levels at which selling prices would rise as the cheetahs move through the trade chain.

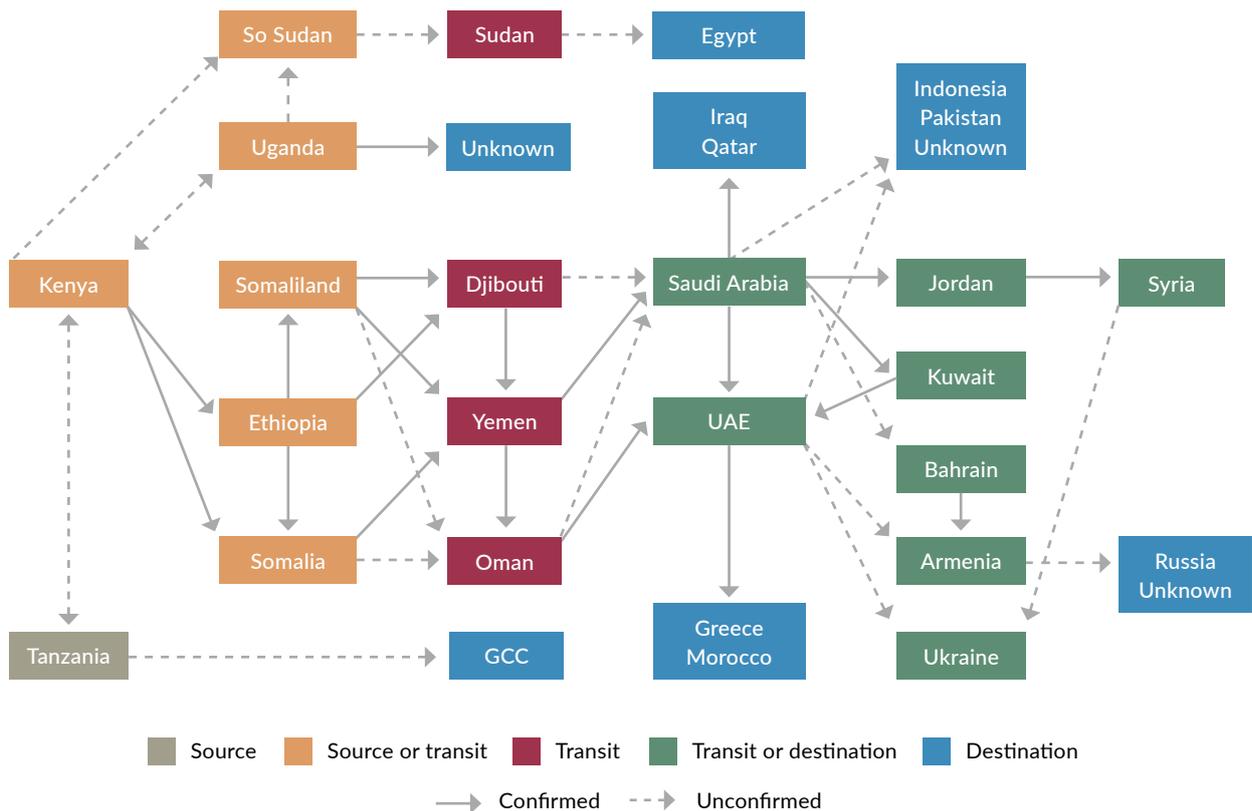


FIGURE 12 Confirmed and unconfirmed illegal cheetah trade routes out of eastern Africa into the Middle East and beyond, 2010–2020.

Illegally poached wildlife is often moved by means of infrastructure used for trafficking other illegal goods such as drugs, people and weapons.⁵⁶ In the case of cheetahs and other wildlife from eastern Africa, this became apparent during an investigation carried out in Yemen by journalist Joe Sheffer in 2013. During the months he spent in Yemen, he met with various wildlife dealers who often mentioned coastal locations in Somaliland such as Lughaya or Zeila as the origin of smuggled wildlife, confirming that it is indeed by boat that animals are smuggled into Yemen. One of these dealers introduced him to an individual who boasted of connections with the president, which facilitated his smuggling diesel from Yemen to Somaliland every night. He noted that on the return trips he transported animals, women, drugs and alcohol ‘more for sport than hard profit’, and proceeded to offer Sheffer as many Ethiopian women as he liked.⁵⁷



▲ Demand for exotic pets and big-cat sightings in zoos show no signs of diminishing. © Arne Dedert/picture alliance via Getty Images

WHAT DOES THE POST-COVID WORLD HOLD FOR AFRICAN CHEETAHS?

The two main demand drivers – exotic pets and zoos/safari parks – show no signs of diminishing in appeal to certain segments of the public. As the Netflix hit series *Tiger King* demonstrated, big cats in particular continue to fascinate people. There are wild animal parks in almost every country, and these require constant replenishment with new animals. Once COVID-related bans on live animal imports are lifted in key markets such as China when the pandemic recedes, the exports from countries such as South Africa will resume.⁵⁸ The authorities need to adhere strictly to their own laws and CITES regulations to ensure that irregular exports or imports do not occur.

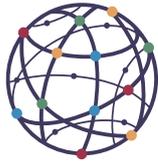
In spite of COVID-19, there are plans to build new zoos and safari parks and renovate and expand existing ones in China, the US and elsewhere.⁵⁹ Once COVID-19 restrictions ease, zoos and safari parks will once again be flooded with visitors, and they will want to see cheetahs. The methods by which that demand is met may have profound consequences for the species as a whole.

NOTES

- 1 There are many IWT publications that address the issue of product prices and the relationship with market supply and demand, but none that do so comprehensively, including data collection methodologies and potential pitfalls to avoid, the importance of accurately designating the point in the trade chain of the price, the need to describe the product for which the price is given (e.g. raw whole, raw cut piece, semi-worked, worked, age if it is a live specimen), if applicable, the weight of the product in relation to the price, supply factors that might influence price, and other challenges. Publications that provide limited discussions of IWT prices are: Michael 't Sas-Rolfes et al., *Illegal Wildlife Trade: Patterns, Processes, and Governance*, *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 44, 2019, 201–228; Monique C Sosnowski et al., *Global ivory market prices since the 1989 CITES ban*, *Biological Conservation*, 2019; George Wittemyer et al., *Illegal killing for ivory drives global decline in African elephants*, *PNAS*, 2014, www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1403984111; and Daniel Stiles, EB Martin and Lucy Vigne, *Exaggerated ivory prices can be harmful to elephants*, *Swara*, 34, 4, 2011, 16–20.
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