

TRAFFIC

BRIEFING DOCUMENT

January 2024

**ONLINE AND
INTERNATIONAL
TRADE IN
LIVE CHEETAHS**

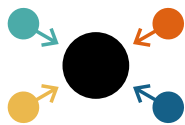


ARCADIA
A CHARITABLE FUND OF
LISBET RAUSING & PETER BALDWIN

OVERVIEW

A six-month survey undertaken by TRAFFIC between October 2022 and March 2023 reaffirms the use of the internet to trade in or display ownership of live cheetahs as pets. This rapid assessment aimed to build on previous work undertaken by researchers

investigating the online trade in live cheetahs to determine if any notable changes have occurred or if new trade dynamics have emerged. Some noteworthy patterns from this survey are highlighted below:



Convergence and links to the trade in other wildlife as pets, including birds, reptiles, primates, and other big cats and small mammals.



Countries in Western Asia continued to play a dominant role in the trade of live cheetahs online, many linked to private or individual ownership in addition to zoos or safari parks.

Discrepancies existed between the number of URLs advertising or displaying live cheetahs and CITES-reported imports of live cheetahs in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.



Users have changed their security and privacy settings of online profiles to restrict public access



The creation of new or multiple profiles by the same user.



Users no longer use commerce language; in some incidences, posts contain only images of cheetahs with no accompanying text.

PREFERRED ONLINE PLATFORMS:





A Cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus* in Namibia

INTRODUCTION

The Cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus* is one of the most threatened big cats globally, and the species is currently only found in 9% of their historical range – limited to highly fragmented pockets in Africa and Asia.

According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, cheetahs are classified as Vulnerable to extinction, and only 6,500 mature individuals are estimated to remain (Durant et al., 2022). Cheetahs are especially vulnerable to exploitation because of the simultaneous threats affecting their survival, such as habitat loss and human-wildlife conflict. Therefore, any exploitation of wild individuals through trade could have a detrimental effect on the viability of the global population.

Cheetahs are also listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), prohibiting the international trade in wild-caught cheetah specimens for commercial purposes, except for

annual quotas for hunting trophies and live specimens granted to Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. Additionally, South Africa is the only country with CITES-registered captive-breeding facilities where live specimens can be legally traded internationally, primarily for zoos and safari parks.

The proliferation of the use of the internet to trade in live cheetahs has been a subject of growing concern in recent years. Traders make use of various platforms, including social media, e-commerce platforms, and mobile phone applications. In 2022-23, TRAFFIC undertook an online survey spanning six months for incidents of suspected trade in live cheetahs or private ownership of live cheetahs to determine if any notable changes have taken place or if new trade dynamics had emerged.



The Cheetah is now only found in **9% of their historical range**

METHODS

a subset of previously collected URLs were gathered

1

2

3

analysis of the CITES Trade Database for international trade in live cheetahs between 1975-2021

A survey between October 2022 and March 2023 to record URLs suspected to involve the trade in live cheetahs

PHASE 1



- Previously collected online data was assessed, covering the period 2010-2019. URLs associated with user profiles and accessible during TRAFFIC's survey period were screened for recent (between 2020 and 2023) listings involving live cheetahs. 213 (75% of the initial total) user profiles were screened for this assessment.
- In cases where recent listings of live cheetahs were found, users who expressed interest in the posts for additional URLs involving live cheetahs were also assessed. This methodology was used to identify and document other profiles and posts which were included in TRAFFIC's data collection.

PHASE 2



- Surveys to record suspected URLs involving live cheetahs in trade or live cheetahs as pets were manually conducted using a combination of keywords in Arabic, Chinese, English, Hindi, Japanese, Punjabi, Russian, Somali, and Swahili on various social media platforms and search engines (see Annex I for list of platforms and search engines).
- Surveys were conducted by TRAFFIC between October 2022 and March 2023. Surveys were conducted weekly over the 26-week period (there was no surveying for three weeks spanning from mid-December to the first week in January 2023) for a total survey time of 180 hours.

The following information from the two datasets for subsequent analysis was recorded:

- The URL
- Whether the URL was linked to a user's profile or a post
- Whether the URL was publicly accessible (i.e., no privacy settings)
- The year the post was listed or the year of the most recent post involving a live cheetah
- Country/territory where the cheetah or user was located, as indicated by the user
- Whether there was a clear intention to trade in live cheetah (i.e., the trader used commerce language such as 'buy' or 'sell'; the trader provided contact details for further information; or the user encouraged direct or private messaging), or whether the post only displayed ownership or possession of live cheetahs as pets
- A screenshot of the post or profile was taken

Surveyors were not able to record and quantify the number of unique individual animals due to resource constraints. Surveyors, however, did work to ensure that the URLs analysed were unique and that there was no duplication between user profiles and posts (i.e., a unique post by user X was not captured if user X's profile was already part of the dataset).

RESULTS

SCREENING OF PREVIOUSLY COLLECTED DATA

17%

profiles contained no listings of cheetahs

(user appeared to have deleted previous posts involving cheetahs)

23%

profiles have changed security and privacy settings,

restricting public access to the profiles

23%

profiles contained recent posts involving live cheetahs between 2020-2023

and were combined with TRAFFIC's data for analysis

37%

profiles contained posts of live cheetahs

that were uploaded before 2020



ONLINE SURVEY

The data analysed revealed 222 unique URLs were linked to:



125 (56%) – URLs that displayed **possession or ownership** of live cheetahs with no apparent intention to trade

42 of these appeared or were suspected to be linked to a **zoo, safari park, game park, or similar institution** 83 were suspected to be individually or **privately owned**

97 (44%) URLs with a **clear intention to trade in live cheetahs**



155 (70%) URLs were found on **social media**

58 (26%) URLs were found on **e-commerce platforms**

9 (4%) were found on **dedicated websites**, online forums, or online news/media articles (see Annex II)



109 **user profiles** who may have had one or more posts involving one or more live cheetahs

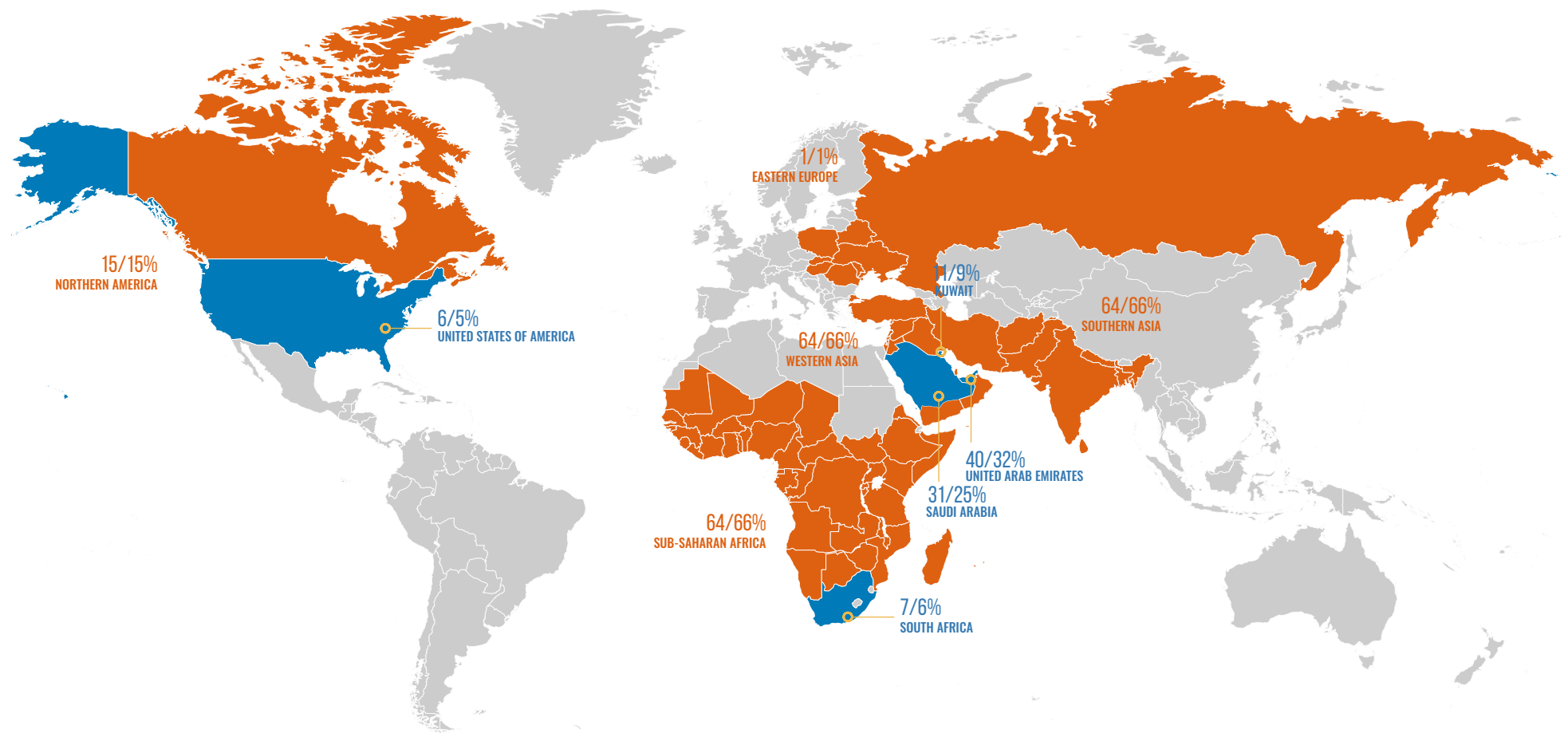
107 **unique posts**

6 **websites**



In some incidences, users have posted fewer listings of live cheetahs over time and included listings of other wildlife as pets, especially other big cats such as tigers and lions

141 (64%) the number/percentage of URLs that **involved other exotic pets** in trade or as pets, including other big cats, reptiles, birds, primates, etc.



- The regions where URLs involving the intention to trade in live cheetahs were found.
- Top five countries with URLs displaying live cheetah ownership or possession as pets.

A full breakdown by country can be found in Annex III.

CITES TRADE DATABASE

Major importers of live cheetahs:



SOUTH AFRICA

- **357 animals** were imported over the period, predominantly sourced from Namibia's wild population before 2000.
- Only 6 animals were imported from Namibia after 2000 with the purpose of reintroduction into the wild and breeding in captivity.



CHINA

- **257 animals** in total, 93 between 2000 and 2009 and 116 between 2010 and 2021, predominantly for zoos.
- The majority (77%) were captive-bred specimens from South Africa
- 14 specimens were imported from Namibia's wild population between 1995 and 1996.



UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

- **207 animals** in total and 133 animals between 2000 and 2020, mainly from South Africa's captive-bred specimens.
- 10 animals were sourced from Namibia's wild population, reportedly traded in 2001 for zoos.

Major exporters of live cheetahs, who are also range States:



SOUTH AFRICA

- **South Africa was the largest exporter**, reportedly exporting 1,574 animals over the period, predominantly sourced from captive-bred specimens.
- Between 2017 and 2021, 212 animals were traded, for the purpose of reintroduction into the wild, for zoos, for breeding in captivity, for commercial purposes and hunting trophies.
- 36 animals (17%) of the 212 above were reportedly sourced from the wild and traded regionally with Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia.
- According to Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, the animals were traded for reintroduction into the wild. By comparison, South Africa reported that 32 animals were traded for reintroduction into the wild, and 4 animals were traded for the purpose of zoos and hunting trophies.



NAMIBIA

- **Importers reportedly imported 616 animals from Namibia** (a discrepancy with Namibia's declared exports of 229 animals). Eighty-five per cent of the discrepancies occurred prior to Namibia's independence in 1990.
- Majority (95%) of the trade occurred prior to 2000, with animals predominantly sourced from the wild, exported mainly to Germany, Japan, South Africa, Thailand and the United States of America, predominantly for zoos and breeding in captivity.
- 10 wild-sourced animals have been exported from Namibia in the last decade (2012-2021) to Cuba for the purpose of zoos. Additionally, Argentina reported importing 1 wild-sourced animal from Namibia in 2015 (no corresponding export reported by Namibia).



ZIMBABWE

- **Zimbabwe reported exporting 12 animals** (19 according to importers) since 1975, with 3 animals reportedly traded in 2020, sourced from captive-bred specimens to Canada for zoos (no corresponding reported imports).
- Additionally, Zambia reported importing 4 wild-sourced specimens for zoos from Zimbabwe in 2012 (no corresponding reported exports from Zimbabwe).

Spotlight on countries involved in online advertisements or displays of live cheetahs as pets:



SAUDI ARABIA

- Reported importing **seven live cheetahs**, all from the United Arab Emirates, between 1997 and 2006.
- 1 of the 7 animals, traded in 2003 for zoo purposes, was reported as originating from a wild-harvested specimen in Somalia.
- Since 2006, there have been no reported imports of live cheetahs into Saudi Arabia.



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

- **Imported 148 live cheetahs**, 106 (70%) between 2000 and 2009 and 38 (25%) between 2010 and 2021, primarily for the purpose of breeding in captivity, personal, and zoos.
- 95% were reportedly captive-bred or captive-born specimens from South Africa (135 animals), Qatar (3 animals), Germany (2 animals) and the Netherlands (1 animal).
- 3 animals were sourced from wild populations in Botswana and Namibia in 1991 and 2008, respectively.
- By comparison, Qatar declared no exports of captive-bred specimens to the United Arab Emirates but did report a re-export of three animals to the United Arab Emirates, reportedly sourced from wild specimens in Somalia in 2003.



YEMEN

- Reported zero exports or imports of live cheetahs since 1975.

OTHER COUNTRIES WITHIN THE REGION OF WESTERN ASIA THAT RECORDED IMPORTS OF LIVE CHEETAHS:

- Bahrain – 4 (from Saudi Arabia, imported in 2014)
- Kuwait – 2 (from the United Arab Emirates, imported in 2006)
- Qatar – 5 (3 imported from Somalia in 2002 and 2 imported from the United Arab Emirates in 2012)



Cheetah cubs seized from illicit trade

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This survey has reaffirmed previously drawn conclusions made by other researchers that the internet continues to be used for trading in live cheetahs and for displaying live cheetahs as pets, potentially in violation of national and international laws. Noteworthy patterns were revealed by screening previously collected online survey data:

- Several URLs associated with social media profiles were no longer publicly accessible due to users changing their security and privacy settings. The users may still have been active on their profiles, but surveyors were unable to publicly screen these profiles for indications of live cheetahs as users have restricted public access to their profiles.
- Several user profiles, previously identified as advertising live cheetahs for sale, removed or deleted the relevant posts. Additionally, in many incidences where recent posts involving live cheetahs were found on these profiles, the intention to trade was no longer clear, making it difficult to ascertain the user's intent. The user may genuinely have no intention to trade in live cheetahs, or this method could be a way to avoid detection of the posts by regulating bodies.
- Several new profiles were linked to previously identified user profiles (in many cases, it appeared to be the same individual creating a new profile).

Based on this survey's findings, it appeared that social media was the dominant mechanism by which internet users attempted to trade live cheetahs or display live cheetahs as pets. This survey also noted the use of e-commerce platforms, online forums, and

specifically dedicated websites seemingly created to trade many exotic wildlife pets, including cheetahs.

While not the focus of this online survey, surveyors noted the convergence of the trade in live cheetahs or the display of cheetahs as pets with other types of wildlife traded or considered pets. Nearly 65% of the URLs analysed also contained evidence of other wildlife in trade or as pets, including other big cats (lions, tigers, leopards), reptiles, birds, antelope, primates, and other mammals. These were found within the same or in separate listings by the same user. In some incidences, there were fewer posts of live cheetahs found within the last five years and, instead, more posts involving other big cats such as lions and tigers.

The regions and countries/territories identified from more recent online posts are similar to those identified from the baseline dataset used in this survey. Countries within Western Asia, specifically Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, were identified as major role players, alongside Kenya, South Africa, and the United States of America.

Discrepancies appeared when CITES reported imports of live cheetahs, and the number of URLs found involving live cheetahs was compared. These discrepancies existed for Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

This mismatch is likely explained if the animals were imported illegally or they have been bred within the borders of these countries without reports to the International Cheetah Studbook.



When comparing CITES reported imports of live cheetahs and the number of URLs found involving live cheetahs, discrepancies existed for **Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen**

RECOMMENDATIONS

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND COLLABORATIVE AGENCIES

The following recommendations are targeted towards relevant law enforcement agencies (or organisations working in collaboration with law enforcement) for an investigation into possible violations of national or international laws:

INVESTIGATE USER PROFILES

Investigation into the user profiles or accounts previously identified as involving live cheetahs but not publicly available.

EXPAND ONLINE SURVEYS

Expand online surveys to other search engines and platforms in additional languages not covered by this survey.

ONGOING ACCOUNT MONITORING

Continuous and regular monitoring of user accounts where previous posts involving live cheetahs have been deleted or removed by the user to determine whether any new violating posts or advertisements are uploaded by the user.

CONDUCT NETWORK ANALYSIS

Network analysis and further research are warranted to better understand the connection between online users and existing suspects or offenders involved in the illegal trade of live cheetahs.

ANIMAL IDENTIFICATION

Further work to accurately quantify and identify individual animals is warranted, given the likelihood that different users may post the same cheetah.

IDENTIFY CAPTIVE BREEDING

Identification of possible captive breeding facilities for live cheetahs within Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Yemen

RECOMMENDATIONS

RESEARCH AND BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE ORGANISATIONS

The following recommendations are targeted towards organisations conducting research on wildlife trade dynamics and organisations with the resources to engage in behavioural change communications and awareness raising:

ANALYSE EXOTIC PET OWNERSHIP

Given the evidence that some users are posting fewer listings of live cheetahs but additional listings of other wildlife as pets, further research to understand the trends in the motivations and behaviour of users and their preferences for exotic pets is warranted.

ANALYSE BIRTHS AND TRADE IN CHEETAHS

Investigation and analysis of reported births, exports and imports of live cheetahs in the International Cheetah Studbook

EMPLOY TARGETED SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE COMMS

Better awareness and targeted behavioural change communications about the illegal trade of live cheetahs and relevant laws and regulations governing the trade and ownership of live cheetahs.

ANNEX I

LIST OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND WEB ENGINES USED TO SEARCH FOR LIVE CHEETAHS IN THIS STUDY

Facebook
Google
Instagram
LinkedIn
Snapchat
TikTok
Twitter
YouTube

ANNEX II

LIST OF E-COMMERCE AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, NEWS MEDIA, WEBSITES, AND ONLINE FORUMS FOUND TO CONTAIN URLS INVOLVING LIVE CHEETAHS IN TRADE OR AS PETS

Ad to Business	Ma7room
Ads 4 ae	Muamat
Amazing Exotic Pets	Onsales.in
Arab News	Pepsell
Bloombiz Europe	Pet Exotic Wild Cats
Businessrays	Pet Sanctuary
Chitku	Public Ads
Darahem	Qaidex
Ebuyorsell	Qatar shares
Exotic Pets for Sale Online	Sayidaty
Facebook	Sulekha
Free Ads	Swalif
Gulf Classifieds	TikTok
Haraj	Tradekey
Instagram	Twitter
Khaleeji Ads	UAE Classifieds
Kuwait Business Directory	Wildlife 4 Sale
Kuwait Local	Wseetk
Loozap	YouTube
Luxury Pet Source	Zidvi

ANNEX III

THE REGIONS AND COUNTRIES/TERRITORIES WHERE URLS INVOLVING THE INTENTION TO TRADE IN LIVE CHEETAHS WERE FOUND.

REGION AND COUNTRY/TERRITORY	NUMBER OF URLS (PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL)
Asia	66 (68%)
Western Asia	64 (66%)
Saudi Arabia	27 (28%)
Kuwait	24 (25%)
United Arab Emirates	10 (10%)
Yemen	2 (2%)
Bahrain	1 (1%)
Southern Asia	2 (2%)
Pakistan	2 (2%)
Americas	15 (15%)
Northern America	15 (15%)
United States of America	15 (15%)
Africa	11 (11%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	8 (8%)
Kenya	5 (5%)
South Africa	3 (3%)
Northern Africa	3 (3%)
Egypt	2 (2%)
Morocco	1 (1%)
Europe	1 (1%)
Eastern Europe	
Russian Federation	1 (1%)
Unknown	4 (4%)

IMAGE CREDITS

Cover	WildFaces / Pixabay
3	DrZoltan/Pixabay
8	Cheetah Conservation Fund

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BRIEFING DOCUMENT

WORKING TO ENSURE THAT TRADE
IN WILD SPECIES IS LEGAL AND
SUSTAINABLE, FOR THE BENEFIT OF
THE PLANET AND PEOPLE

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