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“ There will always be livestock farmers who will never change their minds about predators, but we have many livestock farmer friends who have learned how to co-exist with cheetahs.”

Laurie Marker
Founder and Executive Director
Cheetah Conservation Fund





Living Peacefully with Predators

Story and Photos By Linda N. Cortright



It's puppy day and less than a dozen farmers have driven close to several hundred kilometers through northern Namibia to pick up their new pooch. The last part of the journey is along a deeply rutted dirt road and requires checking in with a guard who is posted by a gate at the 10-foot high chain-link fence. Never has bringing home a pup been more serious business. Laurie Marker, founder and executive director of Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), knows that these roly-poly pups could someday mean the difference between life and death. Not just for the farmers' livestock, but for the cheetah as well.

It is a fact that farmers throughout the world face an ongoing threat from predators. Sometimes it can be as seemingly benign as a neighbor's dog, who can turn a chicken coop into a slaughterhouse, or a pack of coyotes working quickly in the night. Bears have been known to drag a 200-pound ram

Above: Kangal dog leading a herd of goats on the farm operated by Cheetah Conservation Fund. Right: Farmers holding their new dogs, which they have come to pick-up on puppy day. (Photo courtesy of CCF.) Opposite: Donkeys are also used on the farm as livestock guardian animals.





through electric fencing, and snow leopards steal goats in the High Himalayas with the ease of the drive-thru at McDonald's.

For many, there has been only one solution—get a gun. No more predators, no more problems. Except when the predator is threatened by extinction, and then man and beast must try to find a more peaceful alternative.

In Western countries where farming is frequently a hobby and questions of gun control are guaranteed to erupt in a heated dispute, solving the problem of predation peacefully is perhaps a more understandable alternative. But for a farmer in Africa whose very life, as well as that of his flock, might be at risk; it is a gun, and not a dog, that is man's best friend.

When farmers arrive at CCF for puppy day they have already gone through an extensive screening process. "Working with Livestock Guardian Dogs (LGD) does not come naturally to these farmers" says Laurie. "But we have never criticized nor judged them based on past practices. Our goal is to educate and support them as they go forward."

And so it is that in the brittle savannah of Namibia, Laurie Marker has dedicated her life to saving the cheetah, and that has meant teaching farmers to put down their guns and learn to rely on dogs and better farm management systems instead.

The practice of using Livestock Guardian Dogs certainly isn't new. CCF uses the Kangal, a type of Anatolian Shepherd, which has a history of over 6,000 years working in the arid Anatolian Plateau region of Turkey, therefore making it climatically suited to living in a country dominated by desert. The Kangal is also an imposing dog weighing 150 pounds and able to reach a top speed of 40 mph, and according to Laurie these were some of the characteristics that made them an appropriate choice for standing up to large predators. Historically, the Anatolian

Shepherd is considered highly trustworthy and protective. Simply put, you don't want a guardian dog with bouts of insecurity fending off a hungry African cat.

Why the Cheetah?

Had it not been for Laurie's goal of becoming a winemaker she probably never would have fallen in love with the cheetah. An animal lover since childhood, Laurie's mother convinced her that her passion would never earn her a living and so Laurie began studying the wine industry in Napa, California.

Eventually, Laurie moved to Oregon to start her own vineyard and winery and by chance, a wildlife park opened up less than two miles down the road from her new home. Imbued with unstoppable passion, Laurie walked into the park one day and talked herself into a job. There, amidst a variety of animals from around the world Laurie fell in love with her first cheetah.

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"I wanted to learn more about the cheetah but there was surprisingly little information available." Fast-forward 30 years and a doctorate from Oxford University; Laurie Marker is now one of the most celebrated heroes in the conservation industry and one of the world's leading authorities on cheetahs.

Ask her what is threatening the cheetah the most and the answer is simple—a lack of understanding about the balance of nature.

It is estimated that there are 15,000 cheetahs left in the world and twenty-percent of them live in Namibia. A century ago the cheetah population exceeded 100,000 and though their numbers have dwindled as the result of anthrax disease, rabies and larger predators in the wild, cheetahs suffered their heaviest loss in the 1980s when 7000 were killed on Namibian farmland alone.

The widespread killing was caused in part by the "drought of the century". Owing to scarce water supplies, farmers were unusually aggressive in removing local wildlife who were competing with the farmers' own animals for a drink. Flocks of sheep and goats were faced with life-threatening conditions as forage died and water disappeared. As a result, wild game that would ordinarily keep a safe distance from man and his land were forced to move in closer to the farmland where the odds of finding a secure water supply were much higher.

In response to this dire situation, and at the same time Namibia gaining its independence as a free state, CCF was founded in 1990. Four years later, the first dogs were placed on Namibian farmland. But it is a steep learning curve at best for both man and dog. When puppy day rolls around, it's man who gets the training.

Both commercial and subsistence farmers live in Namibia and the cheetah, or any other predator, certainly doesn't discriminate between the two. However when it comes to owning an LGD, the family that is already in a marginalized environment may not readily understand the importance of adequate healthcare, nutrition, and training of their dog—perhaps because they would be lucky to have some of those very same things for themselves. Although livestock loss of any description cannot be minimized, the subsistence farmer is more likely to be effected by the loss of a single sheep, or goat, than a commercial farmer who raises several hundred. Time and again it has been proven that even the very best animal can't ward away an attacker if it is suffering from malnutrition or inadequate vaccination.

And so for a single day, CCF puts farmers through intensive training about basic rules of dog ownership. They

are given lectures, a comprehensive Power-Point presentation, and hands-on training showing them how to properly raise a puppy with their flock. Dogs are most effective at bonding and defending livestock if they are introduced between 8 to 16 weeks of age, but if left unsupervised it is easy for a young pup to be traumatized by a member of the herd.

“Guard dogs will instinctively bark at something that is threatening the flock, but in Africa we have had to teach the dogs the difference between a cheetah that comes too close, and a family of baboons.

“Baboons are the nastiest animals in the wild. They can tear out a goat’s udder in a matter of seconds and be gone. Unfortunately, it’s the cheetah that is often blamed for the damage.

“Our goal is to get farmers to live peacefully with predators” says Laurie. “And that means understanding the role of the predator in the ecosystem.”

The problem of the farmer and the cheetah has evolved over time. Although the creation of large parks and reserves is often intended to protect the species, the limitation of habitat has created an unnatural battle for territory. Lions and hyenas are suddenly competing with the cheetah for living space—and food — and the cheetah is the one to lose, often at the expense of having their kills stolen or their cubs eaten.

Consequently, the cheetah has been forced out of these protected areas and ends up on farmland. The situation is further complicated by the fact that cheetahs are day hunters and so, unlike a leopard which operates at night, farmers mistakenly believe the cheetah is responsible for the damage because they are in sight.

“Fencing is what keeps the cheetah from surviving in its natural habitat” says Laurie. “We need to create large interconnected landscapes that will support cheetahs and their prey and allow man to live as well.”

Success?

Since 1994 CCF has placed more than 350 dogs with commercial and communal farmers in Namibia and reports show that the LGD is doing its job. CCF maintains meticulous records to evaluate the success of the program and, according to a survey issued to farmers, 75% reported a large decline in the levels of stock loss since getting an LGD. Prior to getting an LGD, farmers reported killing up to 19 cheetahs a year on their land, even if no immediate threat was perceived.

Top: Laurie Marker with orphaned cubs that will eventually be released into the wild. Middle: Laurie Marker and a Kangal dog doing a high five times two! Bottom: Laurie Marker receiving a gentle cheetah kiss.



"The only way a program will work is if there is an economic gain for the farmer" says Laurie.

When an LGD senses a threat it immediately becomes agitated and starts barking loudly. Typically this is enough to make the predator go elsewhere, but farmers have reported seeing dogs killing jackals, leopards and even baboons that were threatening their stock. Interestingly, an LGD has never killed a cheetah nor has a cheetah ever killed one of CCF's dogs.

But defending goats and sheep in Africa is not entirely without its consequences; dogs have been killed by poisonous snakes and angry baboons. And though no system is foolproof, part of the challenge is training the dogs to not actually chase or harass the predator, but to hold their defensive position to prevent intrusion. Laurie is quick to point out that dogs which show overly aggressive tendencies are not used in their breeding program.

In addition to CCF's training and breeding program they also run a model farm at the Research Center with cattle, goats, sheep, and LGDs, along with an integrated system of hundreds of free-ranging antelope, wild cheetahs, leopards and other animals in the Namibian ecosystem.

Between running the Research Center, tending the dogs, and supervising up to 50 volunteers that come at regular intervals throughout the year, there is no such thing as a routine day at the office for Laurie. To begin with, Chewbaaka, a 15 year-old cheetah cub that was rescued and serves as CCF's four-legged ambassador, is sleeping on the patio. Meanwhile inside the house, a pair of

orphaned babies only slightly smaller than a Great Dane are wrestling on the sofa. Laurie has served as a surrogate mother to more cheetahs than she cares to recall, but almost all of them are able to be habituated and released either at the Center or some other suitable habitat.

Recently, a farmer delivered four newborn cheetah cubs that were pulled from their mother's stomach after she had been killed. "Obviously we don't like seeing animals get shot, but at least some farmers are now willing to help and bring the orphans to us."

The majority of animals protected by dogs placed by CCF are not wool-bearing. Boer goats are by far the most popular livestock and the number of Karakul sheep is comparatively few. However, CCF is at the frontier of a new brand of wool – Predator Friendly®. (www.predatorfriendly.org). Inspired by a need to address more humane farming systems and balanced habitats, Predator Friendly is a coalition of ranchers, conservationists and clothing manufacturers certifying wool growers that employ Predator Friendly® practices. Their program has subsequently been expanded to include Predator Friendly® meats, eggs and honey, too.

The idea of a peaceable kingdom is one that has for all too long only existed on the canvas painted by Edward Hicks—a seemingly impossible scene of man and beast in harmonious coexistence. But surely if man and dog can survive in the wilds of Africa, then indeed there is a future to keep livestock safe, and wildlife living free. *WF*



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