

The Status of Cheetah in Malawi

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Cheetah were reported as almost extinct from Malawi in 1996 and it appears that the species is now extirpated from this country mainly due to reduced habitat and prey as a result of an increased human population. Historically the cheetah was never widespread in this country due limited areas of suitable habitat and prey. Since 1980 cheetahs were only reported in three national parks along the western border with Zambia, the source of the cheetahs in Malawi. Given changes in Zambia as well as Malawi, it appears that there are no longer corridors for movement of cheetahs into Malawi, and the areas and prey base within the country cannot support viable populations.

Current status of cheetah in Malawi

Malawi is one of the most densely populated countries in southern Africa (Fig. 1), and falls within the moist miombo belt of Africa, an area thought to be generally unsuitable for cheetah given low prey densities (Myers 1975). In the late 1980's cheetahs were reported as absent from most of Malawi, and only resident in Kasungu National Park, and infrequent in Nyika and Vwaza Marsh protected areas (Ansell & Dowsett 1988, Gros 1996, Caro, unpubl. report; Fig. 1). In these previous reports it was mentioned that cheetahs were only present in these protected areas as a result of linkages into neighbouring Zambia, where a complex of protected areas exist in the Luangwa Valley, and it was stressed that linkages to these areas needed to be maintained.

By 2007, it was reported during a review of information regarding the status and distribution of carnivores in protected areas of the Zambezi Basin, an ecological area that almost completely encompasses Malawi, that cheetahs were no longer present in any of the protected area of Malawi (Purchase *et al.* 2007; P. Taylor, L. Labuschagne, S. Michael, all pers. comm.), with the possible exception of Kasungu National Park (Kamwend 2005), as there have been no confirmed sightings of cheetahs in the last 5 years. During the same review it was found that cheetahs had not been recorded in the North Luangwa National Park in Zambia since 1985, were infrequent and at low densities in South Luangwa National Park and their status was unknown in the other protected areas that comprise the Luangwa complex

(see Zambia Status report in this same volume for more details). Anecdotal evidence suggests that over hunting of the species may have been the cause of decline in Zambia, and this, coupled with a reduction in prey and habitat due to increasing human populations in the corridors connecting the protected areas in both countries, has resulted in local extinction in Malawi.

Recommendations

Nyika and Vwaza March protected areas are now part of a proposed transfrontier conservation area (TFCA) with the aim of linking wildlife (and tourist) populations in the Luangwa valley and the two Malawi areas. Such initiatives will improve corridors for wildlife movement, and is the only hope of seeing the return of cheetah to the Malawi protected areas in the long term.

Acknowledgements

The Zambezi Society provided the financial support to carry out this preliminary assessment. I am very grateful for the feedback from Paul Taylor (Malawi Wildlife and Environment Society) Lucille Labuschagne (Nyika TFCA) and Stewart Michael (Lower Shire protected areas).

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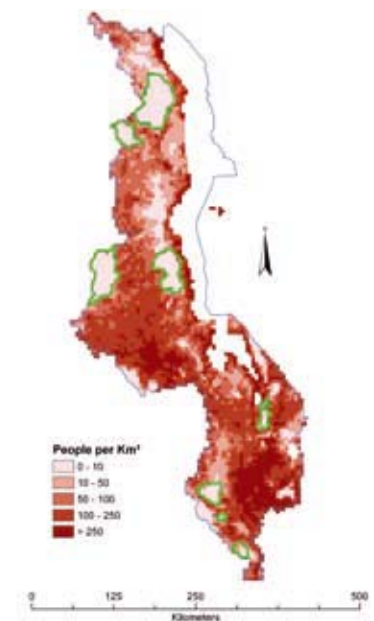


Fig. 1. Human Population Density in relation to protected areas of Malawi (Source: WDPA Consortium 2006, Center for International Earth Science Information Network 2007).

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