UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL
IS BAD FOR CHEETAH HEALTH
The Maasai Mara in Kenya is a magnet for people who want a guaranteed up-close and personal experience with the big cats. But how up-close and personal should these encounters be? The recent proliferation of places where people can physically interact with semi ‘tame’ animals suggests that humans have a deep desire to bond with wild creatures. Throughout the world there are many places where such encounters can be had, but wildlife areas are certainly not among them. Getting up-close and personal with a wild animal in a wildlife area is risky for both the animal and the people involved. What’s more, in the Maasai Mara National Reserve and the conservancies it is against the rules.

In the Maasai Mara, some of these encounters, particularly with cheetahs, are becoming a bit too ‘intimate’. What started off as a couple of cheetahs occasionally jumping on vehicles has turned into a tourist attraction, with some tourists and guides actively promoting this practice. I have personally witnessed guides encouraging cheetahs, who are known for their car-jumping behaviour, to jump on cars by strategically blocking the cheetahs’ path. Over the last couple of months there has been an alarming surge of posts on social media of people physically interacting with cheetahs. Once on their vehicles, people pose for a ‘selfie’ with the cheetahs and some are getting more daring by actually touching the cheetahs and placing objects, such as baseball caps, on them! Some images show cheetahs hissing and swatting at cameras suggesting they are being provoked by the camera person. But it doesn’t stop there. Recent posts have shown images of cheetahs being allowed to not only climb onto but also into vehicles.

As a researcher and a conservationist who has worked on wild cheetahs for over eight years I feel that it is time that something is done about this situation. There are two issues at stake here: injury to people and cheetahs and transmission of disease. The Mara is not a zoo and we need to remember that these are still wild animals. It astounds me that the people who have been part of this behaviour seemingly have little fear and respect for these animals especially in light of recent accidents in South Africa where a lion killed and a leopard injured a person. The lion was relocated but the leopard was destroyed. Cheetahs, being timid creatures, are unlikely to

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attack unless provoked but accidents can still happen. Even if a person does not get hurt then it is likely a cheetah will. Recently a female cheetah injured her leg after jumping off a vehicle – this may restrict her hunting ability which can have severe consequences not only for herself but also for her four dependent cubs.

Another concern is the transmission of diseases from wild animals to humans, also known as zoonoses. The cheetahs in the Mara are wild which means that they are not vaccinated against the myriad of disease that ‘tame’ animals are. The Mara Cheetah Project has collected data showing that 26% of the cheetah population in the Mara at some stage had visible signs of mange, a skin disease caused by mites. These mites can easily be transferred to humans through direct physical contact or by coming into contact with an area Where a cheetah has shed mites. I had the unfortunate experience of being covered in such parasites after being near a dead cheetah while a Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) veterinarian carried out an autopsy.

Although the infestation was self-limiting it was not an enjoyable experience! There are also more sinister diseases that cheetahs can carry.

The way I see it, there are two ways we can all try to limit this practice: Firstly, and most importantly, by stopping cheetahs from climbing onto and into vehicles. This practice is prohibited by the wildlife authorities in the Mara and we should support them as they crack down on people allowing cheetahs to climb on and into their vehicles. Guides should stop this behaviour by simply moving away when a cheetah, especially those known to jump on vehicles, approaches a car. A good guide should be able to read the cheetahs behaviour and avoid this. But tourists also have a responsibility by not encouraging or putting pressure on guides to allow cheetahs to come in close proximity. If you come across such posts, condemn them rather than commend them. Cheetahs already face a kaleidoscope of threats that are causing significant declines. Let’s not add additional stress to these animals. We can all play a role in cheetah conservation by respecting these felids in peril.

Over the forty years that we have been watching big cats in Kenya’s spectacular Maasai Mara National Game Reserve a number of cheetahs developed the habit of jumping on to vehicles. This practice gained wide coverage in the 1990s and 2000s when the popular TV series Big Cat Diary was filmed in the Mara and cheetahs such as Queen (Amber to BCD viewers) and Kike became famous to millions of people across the world due to their car climbing antics and relaxed and trusting disposition. At the time we felt privileged to experience such a close up encounter with a wild cheetah and were always extremely careful not to take advantage of this. We never touched the cheetahs or let them get into our vehicles; the last thing we wanted was for them to become so bold and familiar with visitors that they behaved less cautiously around people with livestock. Times have changed since Big Cat Diary and to safeguard the interests of both cheetahs and visitors we would ask everyone to cooperate with the Reserve Authorities in doing everything possible to help discourage this practice. If you see a cheetah approaching your car - particularly if it is a cheetah such as Malaika (and her cubs) who is known to jump on vehicles - please prevent her from doing this by driving carefully away before she can attempt to this. Please be particularly careful whenever you are near a mother cheetah with cubs; there have been incidents over the years of small cubs being injured - even killed - by vehicles. It is important to remember that big cats are not your ‘friends’ however used to human presence they may appear be to be. They are wild creatures that demand the greatest of respect.

Thank you for your cooperation.

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