My Summer in Africa and I what I Learned from Big Cats

This past summer, 2013, I had the extraordinary experience of traveling to South Africa. My friend Kelsi, an old classmate, invited me to come with her to Bloemfontein, South Africa to work on a breeding project called Cheetah Experience. The purpose of the project is to promote and fund the conservation of cheetahs and other endangered species through captive breeding, behavioral research and public awareness. Kelsi invited me on this adventure just weeks after I returned from a semester abroad in Australia. I had not planned (or budgeted) another overseas trip, but couldn’t say no to this once in a lifetime opportunity, and was determined to make it happen. I dove straight in to the logistics of how I could make this happen and applied for the honors enrichment grant for help.

The staff members at Cheetah Experience display an extraordinary passion and love for their work and animals. Since its founding in 2006 they have been working around the clock to breed and raise these majestic animals. Their long-term goal is to bring diversity to the cheetah bloodline so future generations can be released into protected wild lands. The first two cheetah cubs to be born successfully at Cheetah Experience, Abby and Apollo, are turning two this October. Once they are old enough they will become a part of the breeding project. Since then there have been many other successes and cheetah experience is expanding to breed leopards and servals.

A standard day at the farm is long and tiring but always enriching! Ten hours at the farm is normal and includes animal care and general maintenance of the facility. Daily duties include giving educational tours to the public, preparing meals for the animals, cleaning of enclosures, testing the voltage of the electric fences, watering plants, and animal enrichment and observation. Talking with the staff members I learned much more, including some of intricacies of managing the breeding project, and current policies affecting animal conservation.

Breeding is a slow process. When a female is coming into heat, the male cheetahs will be moved around to her enclosure, when she is absent. This allows them to pick up the scent, and leave their own. Under careful observation staff will take note of which of the male cheetahs seem to take the females interest. The first signs are calling, which sounds like a bird chirping. Then the cheetahs will be positioned so they are in adjacent enclosures and are able to interact through the fence. This may take the form of calling back and forth, hissing, stomping or the occasional slapping. If they cheetahs maintain an interest in one another than they will be allowed to mate.
South Africa law allows for lions to be bred and also hunted. This facilitates a practice known as canned hunting, where animals are bred and raised in captivity only to be 'hunted' once they reach maturity. The is a practice I was unaware of before I arrived in Africa, but have become very passionate about. I am currently working on my senior honors thesis and now a large component of my work will be focused on the Africa lion.

One month at cheetah experience was not long enough. It went by in a blur and was overwhelming and exciting as I learned the schedule, chores, animal facts, and most importantly the names and personality quirks of every animal. I learned very quickly that every animal is unique and has something to teach you. Max, a 14-month caracal, taught me patience and understanding. Pardus, a 14-month black leopard, helped me fine tune my reflexes and taught me to always watch my back. Dew and Dawn, two 7-month old cheetah sisters, helped me to open my heart.

The animals don't care where you are from, or what your job is. They do not question your motives or intention; they strip down all superficial layers and judge you solely on your actions. Kindness is returned with kindness. As time went on the animals gained my trust and accepted me so I was able to interact with them with more confidence and without supervision. By the end of the month I had formed many indescribable bonds, and was heart broken because it was time to leave. I was at Cheetah Experience for 28 days, and they were happiest days of my life.
Pardus giving me some playful affection