

Local NGO reviving old herding method to mitigate human, wildlife conflict

Cheetah Conservation Botswana reintroduces the old livestock guard dog method to help farmers protect livestock and safe predators from retaliatory killings - Writes Thobo Motlhoka



Livestock farmer Bakang Botswana

Anna Toromba's dog led her to 20 stolen goats

Livestock farmer Baitshapi Gaboitsalwe

In 2017 livestock farmer Bakang Botswana and his wife applied for a Youth Development Fund (YDF) grant, an affirmative-action initiative by the Botswana government aimed at mitigating the country's high youth unemployment numbers.

Through the programme, the government funds youth businesses with the obligation to pay back half of the capital.

The unemployed couple acquired 73 goats later in the year through the initiative. Their small integrated farm is located just outside the small settlement of Karakubis, 141 km from the town of Ghanzi along the A2 highway (Trans-Kalahari Highway) towards the Botswana, Namibia border.

Barely two weeks after acquiring the livestock tragedy hit. The couple lost almost half (30) of their goats to predators including cheetahs, hyenas, and the black-backed jackal over a couple of days.

"We were crushed," he tells The Telegraph. "We almost lost hope." Botswana says it was not until he shared the bad news with his brother in law that he was introduced to the local NGO Cheetah Conservation Botswana (CCB).

The organization had been assisting livestock farmers in the region with guard dogs since early 2000s. "They put us on the waiting list". Botswana was eventually assisted with a dog in 2018. "After losing 30 goats within a week in 2017 we have now lost only 10 in the last six years since Cheetah Conservation Botswana brought us the guard dog."

He says the only time he gets to lose a goat is when the animal strays away from the group during grazing, consequently becoming a perfect target

for the predators away from the dogs' sight. Botswana also trained another dog after introduction to the program to beef up security.

CCB introduced the 'Farming for Conservation' programme following numerous reports of conflict between farmers and wildlife in the Ghanzi district. While their mandate is more concerned with the scientific research and conservation of cheetah populations in Botswana, CCB's responsibilities have also extended to other wildlife (particularly predators) through outreach with farmers, community development and conservation education, and working with rural communities to promote co-existence with Botswana's rich diversity of carnivore species.

Botswana has the world's largest population of cheetahs with an estimated population of just under 2000, accounting for approximately 25 percent of the world's remaining wild cheetahs.

CCB's Morulaganyi Kokole says interspecies competition has forced smaller predators like cheetahs out of protected areas and right into direct conflict with humans.

"Loss of habitat is a huge challenge for the cheetah," Kokole says. "Lions have often preyed on their young ones." He says as an NGO they noticed how human, wildlife conflict had now resulted in the reduction of cheetah population in Botswana. Due to Botswana's location in the centre of southern Africa, the NGO says population is also crucial to facilitate connectivity between other regional populations.

Because of their wide-ranging nature, animals like the cheetah and the African wild dog need large areas to survive. As a result, protected areas cannot solely be relied upon to

maintain populations of these species, which is why more than 70 percent of Botswana's cheetah population is said to live outside protected areas.

"We thought it would be important to come up with interventions to conserve both the cheetah population and farmers' livestock," says Kokole, CCB's Community Outreach Coordinator under the Farming for Conservation Department. That is how the NGO decided to revive the old shepherd dog technique. Since then the introduction of guard dogs to herd livestock has been an effective way for Ghanzi District farmers to keep away predators like jackals, cheetahs, and hyenas.

The guard dogs are trained by CCB at their Ghanzi Camp to protect livestock from predators and to also alert the farmer when a predator is nearby. The dogs are introduced to the livestock as puppies. They not only sleep with the animals in the kraal, they are also fed there.

The initiative has improved the lives of livestock farmers by providing them with an extra layer of protection for their animals. Guard dogs are also able to detect predators from a distance, allowing the farmer to take action before the predator can get close enough to harm the livestock. They have made life easier for the farmers.

Anna Toromba, also a full time livestock farmer in Karakubis, would not contain her appreciation for the impact CCB's programme has had in her life. "Their dogs hit the ground running. They don't need introduction or training," she says. "We have had problems with cheetah, jackal, caracal, and hyena." Toromba's dog has even gone beyond providing protection against these predators. The dog has been able to keep away the most sophisticated predator, humans.

It was the CCB donated dog that led Toromba to recover 20 stolen goats. The dog led the search team comprising Toromba, her children and the police to the livestock thief where all the goats were recovered.

Baitshapi Gaboitsalwe is another beneficiary of the CCB Farming for Conservation programme beneficiary. She keeps goats, sheep, and cattle in Takatshwane lands, 120 km south of Ghanzi.

She was introduced to the programme after losing dozens of goats and sheep to cheetahs and other predators. She received her guard dog in 2021 and has hardly lost an animal since.

Kelathlwe Pheko (also in Takatshwane lands) would lose at least 20 kids (baby goats) a year. "My livestock weren't growing in numbers," he says. A mother would give birth while out browsing and come back home without their newborns because they would have been eaten."

Since the dog, came Gaboitsalwe has been able to see newly born babies come back home in the afternoon with their mothers under watchful eye of the dog.

CCB does not only provide the guard dogs. "We provide support services to ensure the safety and wellness of the dogs. We provide veterinary support not just for our dogs but for the farmers' livestock as well," says CCB's Connie Modise (Community Outreach Officer).

Ghanzi Camp Coordinator Phale Max Seole says apart from research the NGO also hosts education programs and bush camps for students to teach them about wildlife conservation. "We assist farmers on other matters such as livestock health, range management, and livestock theft. We have formed

farmers' network groups to have them speak with one voice about their challenges including human, wildlife conflict."

CCB says predation is not the only problem when it comes to the farmers' livestock loss. The NGO says while research studies consistently show that only a relatively small portion of a cheetah's diet consist of livestock (less than 6%), there is a common perception amongst farmers that carnivores have a significant negative impact on livestock farming, and this has led to indiscriminate retaliatory killings.

"Now Africa's most threatened 'big cat', cheetah populations are unable to sustain the on-going levels of indiscriminate removal, both retaliation and preemptive killings for livestock protection, and poaching for illegal trade. The cheetah is formally protected by law in Botswana and internationally by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) where cheetahs are listed on Appendix I (allowing only limited and highly regulated international trade). Despite these restrictions, many cheetahs are still killed in retaliation for real or perceived livestock predation."

They encourage farmers to keep records in order to identify problem areas. The NGO has a demonstration site at their Ghanzi camp where they train farmers on livestock and crop production through the assistance of various government departments like Veterinary Services and Ministry of Agriculture. All the assistance is free of charge as the NGO bears all the expenses for the provision of dogs, training of farmers, and veterinary services. CCB has been working alongside the Botswana Government since 2003 to help facilitate coexistence between rural communities and carnivore species.