

Big Cats Month launches to bring awareness to dwindling wild cat numbers

 By [Danette Breitenbach](#)

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There are less than 7,000 cheetahs left in the world. This fact was cited by acclaimed big-cat filmmakers Dereck and Beverly Joubert at the launch of *National Geographic Wild's* 11th annual Big Cat Month this February.



Dereck and Beverly Joubert filming *Living with Big Cats*

Included in the line-up is the premiere of the Jouberts' latest film, of *The Way of the Cheetah*, (Sunday 6 February at 18:00). This is their first film on a cheetah.

In the film they follow Immani, a sleek female with four new cubs who must navigate the vast plains of the Mara ecosystem. But living here is also a coalition of five males, and to save her cubs, Immani must avoid them. The film goes under the cover of darkness with thermal cameras, and the Jouberts' capture the lush colours of Africa. However, when it comes to the hunting scenes, these shape shifting cats appear from nowhere in a blur, captured in ultra-high speed motion and the battles turn epic.

The journey of a lifetime

The two started on this journey 30 years ago. Since then they have won eight Emmy-awards from 23 nominations, produced over 35 films for *National Geographic*, published 12 books and half a dozen scientific papers as well as numerous articles for *National Geographic Magazine*.



Relentless Enemies

Their film, *Eternal Enemies* reached one billion people. It took them six years to make. “It was nocturnal work, night after night; we were exhausted,” they say.

During their work they have been attacked by elephants four times, and Beverly was severely injured in an attack by a wounded buffalo. “I was in hospital for three months and then in rehab for eight months,” she says.

She is at pains to explain that this was a freak accident and not the buffalo’s fault. “We surprised him, and we did not know he was wounded.” She adds that Dereck and herself still have the same respect for the animals they film now as they did then.

Storytellers, not filmmakers

Each of their films have revealed some behaviour of the cats that was previously not known or thought not to exist. “In *Eternal Enemies*, it was shown that hyenas and lions had nocturnal battles. This behaviour was not known before,” explains Beverly.

Dereck says that Beverly and himself are not filmmakers, but storytellers. “The stories we tell about the big cats are parables for life. “These big cats never give up, show up every day and do what needs to be done with an intense focus and dedication,” he says.

Together the Jouberts have forged an understanding of wildlife to tell what is the greatest story of all: the story of life. Today, however, their biggest realisation is that time is running out for these cats as their populations are threatened. This has changed their focus. “We have moved from a celebration of these animals to the assembly of science on them, to today where we have moved into advocacy,” says Dereck.

Plight of the Big Cats

Today there are only 20,000 lions from nearly half a million 50 years ago in the wild of which 4,000 are male lions. Leopards have declined in population over the same period of time, from 700,00 to 50,000/45,000. Cheetahs have declined from 45,000 to less than 7,000 today.

“It’s a vital time and if we do not protect the cats, they will lose them,” says Beverly.

The National Geographic Society, with its long history of raising awareness of the plight of big cats and supporting impactful conservation efforts across the planet, has partnered with the Big Cats Initiative.

This initiative, founded by the Jouberts, works with some of the world’s leading big cat experts, funding on-the-ground research and innovative conservation projects to safeguard big cats and their critical habitats while leading efforts to shine a light on the challenges these species face.

It is hoped that Big Cat Month will raise awareness about the plight these beautiful creatures face.



The Way of the Cheetah

“Families can look forward to a month of fascinating, premiere, in-depth programming that reveals astounding new insights into these remarkable creatures, as well as highlighting the threats they face and the urgent action needed to conserve and protect our big cats for future generations,” says Christine Service, senior vice president and general manager of The Walt Disney Company Africa.

Big Cat month kicks off this Saturday, 5 February with *Relentless Enemies* with *The Way of the Cheetah* premiering on Sunday, 6 February at 18:00.

Viewers are encouraged to learn more about the Big Cats Initiative and how they can help safeguard big cats in the wild [here](#)

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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