

# Significant litter of cheetah cubs born at Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute

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On May 28, the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute's six-year-old cheetah, Amani, gave birth to the first litter of cheetahs born in the United States this year. Credit: Photo by Meghan Murphy, Smithsonian's National Zoo

Five cheetah cubs were born May 28 to 6-year-old Amani at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Front Royal, Va. Amani is a dedicated mother according to keepers, who have observed her nursing and grooming the cubs.

This litter is particularly significant to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' Species Survival Plan for cheetahs because cheetah births in zoos across the country have dwindled. The SSP matches animals across the country to ensure [genetic diversity](#) in the population. This is the only litter of cheetahs born this year in a North American zoo. Cheetah experts recently met to discuss dramatic management changes to bolster

the population, recommending that cheetahs that are genetically valuable and of reproductive age be moved to one of nine breeding centers—eight in the United States and one in Canada. This will give the animals more space and mating options, increasing the odds of successful reproduction.

"We are very excited that Amani had such a large litter of cubs this time," said Adrienne Crosier, SCBI cheetah biologist. "These cubs are very significant for the future of the population, and each birth gives us an opportunity to learn more about cheetah biology and how females raise their young."

The mortality rate for cheetah cubs in human care is 20 percent during the first six months, compared to a mortality rate of up to 70 percent in the wild population in east Africa. Keepers will continue to monitor the newborns. In addition to the litters born at SCBI in Front Royal, two litters of cheetahs have been born at the Zoo's Washington, D.C. facility since 2004.

SCBI is one of five centers participating in research to boost the captive cheetah population as part of the Conservation Centers for Species Survival, also known as C2S2. All five centers collectively manage more than 25,000 acres of land devoted to the survival of threatened species with special needs (including those requiring large land areas, natural group sizes and minimal public disturbance). All five centers maintain a cheetah breeding facility as part of their long-term commitment to [cheetah](#) breeding and research.

The Front Royal facility currently houses seven adult cheetahs and plans to bring in up to five additional adults from other institutions in North America this year.

"Not only is SCBI continuing to make strides in conserving cheetahs in

the wild, but we are quickly emerging as a successful breeding facility to improve the management of the captive population," said Dave Wildt, director of SCBI's Center for Species Survival and head of C2S2's steering committee. "We aim to build a healthy, genetically diverse and sustainable insurance population so we can begin to manage this species globally, ensuring that cheetahs survive both in human care and in the wild for generations to come. Working together in our C2S2 breeding-center consortium is generating more information faster because we have more access to more study animals."

This is the second litter born to Amani. In December 2010 she gave birth to a male cub. Cheetahs that give birth to only one cub, called a singleton, often cannot produce enough milk to keep the cub alive. Typically, females in the wild will let a single cub die, after which they will enter estrus and breed again. So scientists at SCBI gave Amani's male cub to another female, Zazi, who had a 5-day-old single female cub. This strategy, known as cross-fostering, has worked and Zazi is raising the two active and healthy cubs.

Cheetahs, the fastest [animals](#) on land, are struggling to outpace threats to their survival in the wild. As the result of human conflict, hunting and habitat loss, there are only an estimated 7,500 to 10,000 cheetahs left in the wild. The International Union for Conservation of Nature considers cheetahs a vulnerable species.

Provided by Smithsonian

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