

Zoos struggle to breed endangered species in captivity

By Leslie Kaufman, New York Times

FRONT ROYAL, Va. – After cautiously sniffing the grass, three male cheetahs at the animal-breeding center here suddenly began running in frenzied circles. It was a sign that a female cheetah that normally lives in the yard was in heat.

Then one of the males let out a low, seal-like bark – a signal for an even higher state of arousal. The other males were excused.

To maximize the chances for successful breeding, scientists have learned to separate cheetahs by gender, even preventing them from seeing each other before they mate. It turns out that familiarity can be a turnoff for cheetahs, too.

Finally, it was time to bring in the female. She seemed mystified by the male cheetah's eagerness and failed to assume a mating position. The encounter fizzled.

With extinctions rising and habitats being destroyed, zoos are trying to breed about 160 endangered species in captivity. But while mating in the wild seems largely primal and effortless, in captivity it can be anything but.

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