

CAT CONUNDRUM: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON CHEETAHS IN INDIAN FORESTS

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The Supreme Court's order [enabling the introduction of exotic cheetahs](#) to an Indian habitat on an experimental basis has naturally led to renewed enthusiasm among wildlife lovers, who see in it a potential bulwark against creeping pressures on habitats. As a graceful animal that was hunted and extirpated in the country in the 20th century, the cat has periodically inspired campaigns for a fresh introduction mainly inspired by the nationalistic sense of loss.

Remarkably, the antiquity of the high-speed hunter that formed part of Mughal hunting groups has been a matter of scientific debate, with much literature tracing the origins of the Asiatic cheetah to about 200,000 years ago, and one recent hypothesis arguing, in contrast, that it appears to be a relatively modern alien import to India. With a group surviving in Iran, there is growing interest in preserving the Asian population. Whatever its origins, it is illogical to expect that a new population, whether from Africa or Iran, will fare better today than in the past. It is worth recalling that the same court observed in its 2013 order restraining the Environment Ministry from importing African cheetahs into Kuno, Madhya Pradesh, that there are many seriously threatened Indian species such as the lion, the Great Indian Bustard, Bengal florican, the dugong, and Manipur brow-antlered deer which deserve immediate conservation action.

[Also read: What drove the charismatic cheetah to extinction in India?](#)

Any move to rewild India's threatened natural spaces with cheetahs, which require large grassland ranges, should consider the viability of such a programme. Man-animal conflicts is an area of concern, as a growing human population lives cheek by jowl with tigers, leopards and long-ranging creatures such as elephants. While the Court has appointed an expert committee to guide and direct the experiment proposed by the National Tiger Conservation Authority, it needs a broader scientific inquiry into the added pressures that a small group of introduced predators will impose on an ecosystem, crucially on the prey base that currently sustains tigers and leopards. Any attempt at expensive rewilding will be negated by parallel efforts to liberalise environmental clearances for extractive industries in and around forests. Material extraction including minerals is going on close to protected areas, and fresh roads are sought to be built through even tiger territory, making pristine rewilding an incongruous concept. Moreover, cheetahs are genetically fragile and lose cubs in a litter prematurely, affecting the establishment of a viable population. Restoring ecology and diverse species cannot be a serious goal in the absence of iron-clad protections to existing parks, sanctuaries, migratory corridors, and buffer areas. Preserving wild spaces with surviving species should be the first order priority.

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