

WAIT FOR CHEETAH TO GET LONGER

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Cheetahs at a conservation centre in Namibia. AFP/AFPAFP | Photo Credit: GIANLUIGI GUERCIA

It could be many months before cheetahs from Namibia make it to India. An expert team of wildlife officials from Madhya Pradesh, the Indian Forest Department and the Wildlife Institute of India that visited Namibia for a site visit last week is reportedly “satisfied”, but a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) regarding the transfer is yet to be signed.

“It was a fruitful visit and we saw at least 70 cheetahs,” Y.V. Jhala, Dean, Wildlife Institute of India, told *The Hindu*. “A formal MoU is yet to be signed and the whole process of translocation can take months. The timeline is still to be determined.”

Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav launched an “action plan” at the 19th meeting of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) on January 7 saying, “The cheetah that became extinct in independent India, is all set to return.”

The action plan states that a cohort of 10-12 young cheetahs that are ideal for reintroduction would be imported from Namibia or South Africa as a founder stock during the first year. The animals’ lineage and genetic history will be examined to ensure that they are not from an excessively inbred stock and are in the ideal age group, so that they make up a suitable founding population. Mr. Jhala said that around 35 cheetah would be needed over time to establish such a stock.

The proposed site for introduction is the Kuno Palpur National Park (KNP) in Madhya Pradesh, though at least three other reserves in Central India are being considered.

According to the plan, the Central government, along with the Environment Ministry and the Cheetah Task Force, will create a formal framework to collaborate with governments of Namibia and/or South Africa, through the Ministry of External Affairs.

A press release from Namibia noted that a delegation from India had visited the Cheetah Conservation Fund and had held “bilateral and technical discussions” on introducing the animals.

The Kuno National Park was also supposed to be a site for the Asiatic Lion that is now confined to Gir. However, the Gujarat government, as well as the Centre, for more than a decade, has been dragging its feet on sending the lions to this habitat. Independent conservationists have warned that introducing the cheetah, the only big cat that went extinct in Independent India, would mean shifting the focus from the more urgent need for a second home for the lion.

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