

AFRICAN CHEETAHS TO PROWL INDIAN FORESTS AS SUPREME COURT LIFTS STAY

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The Supreme Court on Tuesday lifted its seven-year stay on a proposal to introduce African cheetahs from Namibia into the Indian habitat on an experimental basis.

The plan was to revive the Indian cheetah population.

In May 2012, the top court had stalled the plan to initiate the foreign cheetahs into the Palpur Kuno sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh, fearing that they may come into conflict with a parallel and a much-delayed project to reintroduce lions into the same sanctuary. The court was also worried whether the African cheetahs would find the sanctuary a favourable climate as far as abundance of prey is concerned.

However, on Tuesday, a Bench led by Chief Justice Sharad A. Bobde was nudged by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) to take the plunge and go ahead with its plans to bring the African cat to India.

But the Bench made sure that the right precautions are taken. It set up a three-member committee, comprising former Director of Wildlife Institute of India Ranjit Singh, DG of Wildlife Institute of India Dhananjay Mohan, and DIG, Wildlife, Ministry of Environment and Forests, to 'guide' the NTCA.

Chief Justice Bobde, speaking for the Bench, directed the committee to file a progress report every four months. The court made it clear that a proper survey should be done to identify the best possible habitat for the cheetahs. Every effort should be taken to ensure that they adapt to the Indian conditions. The committee would help, advise and monitor the NTCA on these issues. The action of the introduction of the animal would be left to the NTCA's discretion.

Officials at the NTCA told *The Hindu* that the court order notwithstanding, the actual process of translocation might be long-drawn. The cheetah does not breed well in captivity and requires vast stretches of grassland, and access to adequate prey to thrive. "There are eight to nine identified sites in India but the best one is in Kuno Palpur sanctuary. However, we still have to make it suitable for the cheetah," a source said.

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