

EXTINCT IN INDIA, CHEETAHS SET TO BE REINTRODUCED FROM SOUTH AFRICA BY AUGUST

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

A male African cheetah in Hyderabad in 2012. File | Photo Credit: Nagara Gopal

The [first batch of cheetahs](#) are expected to arrive in India's Kuno Palpur wildlife sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh by this August, according to senior officials in the Union Environment Ministry, who declined to be identified. The timing chimes with India celebrating 75 years of independence which the Centre has been building up to, as part of the 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav' campaign.

Five of these animals, extinct in India since the 1950s, are expected to be imported from South Africa and/or Namibia. Bilateral discussions are ongoing with both countries. Teams of wildlife experts from both countries are expected to be conducting site visits in Madhya Pradesh this month.

The first year of the cheetahs' arrival will be a trial period. The Kuno sanctuary was intended to be a second home for India's expanding lion population but, due to the Gujarat government's abiding refusal, is unlikely to happen. Officials say that preparations for the cheetah's arrival involve establishing a 'prey base' that can sustain the population and that has already been prepared at the sanctuary.

Though a long standing project, reviving the cheetah—the only wild cat to go extinct in independent India—got new life after the Supreme Court in January 2020 lifted its seven-year stay on a proposal to introduce African cheetahs from Namibia into the Indian habitat on an experimental basis.

In May 2012, the court had stalled the plan to initiate the foreign cheetahs into the Kuno sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh fearing they would come into conflict with the parallel and a much-delayed project to reintroduce lions into the same sanctuary. The court had expressed concerns on whether the African cheetahs would find the sanctuary a favourable climate.

In choosing the cheetahs for India, 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. India's aspires to import at least 30 cheetah in the next five years.

In a document that explains India's rationale in bringing back the cheetah, the government has said it aims to achieve both the biological objectives that is, re-establish the ecosystem function role of the cheetah in representative areas of its former range and contribute to the global effort towards the conservation of the cheetah as a species.

"Simultaneously, we are hopeful that the project will boost and enhance the livelihood options and living conditions of the local communities in and around the landscapes where the cheetah is likely to be introduced through increased revenues from ecotourism and associated activities," the document notes.

A person connected with India's cheetah programme, who declined to be identified, told *The Hindu* that several formalities, because it involved bilateral deals with two countries, were being

ironed. "Talks are on with both government-run and private wildlife reserves in both countries. If it's from the former there will be no payment for the animals, but the latter could involve an insignificant cost."

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