

KUNO NATIONAL PARK UNSUITABLE TO HOST ALL 20 CHEETAHS, NOT ENOUGH PREY, SAYS SCIENTIST

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A Cheetah brought from South Africa is seen in an enclosure at Palpur, Kuno National Park, Madhya Pradesh on February 18, 2023. | Photo Credit: PTI

The Kuno National Park (KNP) in Madhya Pradesh, which [currently hosts 20 cheetahs brought in from Africa](#), does not have enough prey to sustain all the animals. While the Rajasthan government had offered to host some animals in the relatively smaller, but well-equipped, Mukundra Tiger reserve, “political considerations” had prevented this from happening, Yadvendradev Jhala, the wildlife scientist who played a major role in India’s cheetah reintroduction programme, told *The Hindu* in an exclusive interaction.

[Eight cheetahs from Namibia](#) and 12 from South Africa were transported to India between September 2022 and February 2023 as part of an initiative to reintroduce the species to India, where it had gone extinct in the early 1950s.

Dr. Jhala is a former Dean of the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun and among the co-authors of the National Cheetah Action Plan that forms the basis of the cheetah programme. He had superannuated from the institute but had his tenure extended for two years to ensure the smooth execution of the cheetah reintroduction programme. His extended tenure was, however, unexpectedly cut short by a year. “I do believe I have much more to contribute in terms of scientific knowledge and the vision (to ensure sustainable cheetah populations). Maybe the government thinks otherwise,” he said.

As present, there are about 20 chital — the cheetah’s main prey — per square kilometre available at the KNP, a sharp decline from the nearly 60 chital per square km that could be found in the park in 2014, Dr. Jhala said. “This, at the most, would sustain 15 animals, and five ought to have been shifted elsewhere. Unlike the Gangasagar and Nauradehi wildlife sanctuaries (in Madhya Pradesh) which will take at least a year and investments worth 750 crore to be made suitable for the cheetah, Mukundara can immediately accommodate them,” Dr. Jhala explained.

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“Initially the Rajasthan government was reluctant, but they agreed and wrote to the National

Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) last year conveying their readiness to accept cheetahs. But now the Centre doesn't seem keen. They haven't said 'no', but I think they want to wait. I think there are political considerations here," he observed. Unlike in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan has a Congress-led government.

While conservation science and principles of ecology recommend that species populate multiple geographical locations in the interest of their long-term survival, political factors have been known to come in the way. The KNP, which was originally scheduled to accommodate the Asiatic lion from Gir, has yet to receive a single lion despite a Supreme Court order in 2013 directing the state of Gujarat to send them.

Dr. Jhala said the lack of sufficient prey in KNP was a "concerning" situation. "I think the government should consider measures such as prey supplementation [by bringing in more animals]. The government has started developing Gandhi Sagar and has transferred funds to Madhya Pradesh for creating a fenced enclosure like in Kuno," he added.

Incidentally, the Cheetah Action Plan had estimated, on the basis of a scientific sampling process led by Dr. Jhala himself in 2021, that there were 38 chital and 51.58 animals overall per square km at the KNP. The action plan had said that this level of prey could sustain upto 21 cheetahs.

Officials from the NTCA and the Environment Ministry have previously maintained that the 748 square km of the KNP and the larger surrounding habitat of nearly 4,000 square kilometre are together sufficient to maintain 36-40 animals.

There has been considerable debate among conservationists on whether the cheetah, which needs vast tracts to run and hunt, can thrive in India where suitable land is limited unlike in the African reserves. Dr. Jhala, however, underlined that in terms of space, India could host more animals per square km than in Africa because "Indian socio-cultural practices" contributed to better co-existence with big cats as attested to by the rising numbers of the lion, tiger and leopard.

A wildlife expert, who declined to be named, said that prey density numbers were not a reliable indicator of the cheetah's adaptability to a habitat. "The cheetah requires much more area than lions and tigers because it is the weakest of the cats and cannot hold on to its prey. You cannot simply pack cheetahs into enclosures and expect them to survive," he said.

The true success of the cheetah programme would be in having the animals released into the wild and having sustainable populations at multiple locations, Dr. Jhala said. Much like Project Tiger improved India's forested ecosystem over the years, the cheetah project could aid India's open forest and grassland ecosystems, and thus help conserve habitat for other species such as the wolf, bustard, lesser florican and caracal as well.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi's personal interest in the cheetah programme has provided a huge boost and so I'm confident that funds for conservation will not be a problem. However, tourism and participation by local communities is critical to the sustainability of the programme," Dr. Jhala added.

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