

HIGH DENSITY OF LEOPARDS AT KUNO MATTER OF CONCERN FOR CHEETAHS: EXPERT

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A cheetah after being released inside a special enclosure of the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh, September 17, 2022. | Photo Credit: PTI

As eight Namibia-born cheetahs complete more than 50 days in their new home Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh, a South Africa-based animal conservationist has expressed concern over the high density of leopards in the sanctuary, but said the two carnivores have a history of co-existence as well.

[The cheetahs were flown from the African country and released in the Kuno National Park](#) (KNP) in Sheopur district with much fanfare on September 17 at a function by Prime Minister Narendra Modi as part of a project to revive their population in India, seven decades after they were declared extinct.

Since their arrival at KNP, the big cats have been kept inside quarantine enclosures, where they completed 51 days on November 6.

According to animal conservationist Vincent van der Merwe, who manages the cheetah metapopulation in South Africa, the high density of leopards in KNP is a matter of concern for the new guests.

Experts in the past have expressed apprehension about a possible conflict between leopards and cheetahs in the national park.

“The high density of leopards is a matter of concern for cheetahs in KNP. But, two spotted animals have a history of co-existence in South Africa, Namibia and India since centuries,” Merwe, who has been given the responsibility to get 12 cheetahs from his home country to India, said.

In Africa, home to most of the cheetahs in the world, leopards are known to attack the fastest land animal.

“Leopards account for 9 per cent of cheetah mortality in South Africa,” the 40-year-old conservationist, who flew with the eight spotted cats from Namibia to KNP in September, told PTI over the phone from South Africa.

His statement has come at a time when presence of 70 to 80 leopards have been noticed in KNP's core and buffer area spread over 1,200 sq km.

“I form part of a combined Namibian and South African team providing founder animals for reintroduction and giving technical advice to India. As part of this team, I was invited to accompany the founder cheetahs,” he said about his September visit to KNP.

Merwe, who oversaw 31 cheetah translocation projects in South Africa, said the adult fastest mammal on the earth avoids leopards and even chases them away.

“But cheetah cubs and sub-adults do fall prey to leopards,” he added.

Cheetahs have been reintroduced in 64 protected areas within South Africa. These reserves are all small and isolated, and only support cheetah populations that vary from 3 to 30, Merwe said.

Speaking about the Metapopulation Initiative, the expert said it is a private group that coordinates cheetah relocations between the network of metapopulation reserves to prevent inbreeding, cheetah overpopulation or local extinction.

“It offers service to metapopulation reserves by identifying cheetahs for swapping or surplus cheetahs for relocations to reserves where their population needs to be augmented,” said Merwe, who is managing population of the spotted cats in South Africa for the last 11 years.

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A metapopulation programme works by nurturing several populations of the big cat in mostly private game reserves, and swapping cheetahs between these sites to boost the gene pool.

The wildlife expert, who has an MSc in conservation biology and a BSc (Hons) in conservation genetics, said he is hoping to obtain permission from the South African government to return to India with an additional 12 cheetahs for KNP.

“A large founder population will be required to establish cheetahs at Kuno,” added Merwe.

He manages the Cheetah Metapopulation Project in South Africa on behalf of the Cheetah Metapopulation Initiative.

The Indian government has urged its South African counterpart to make cheetahs available for its reintroduction efforts, he said.

“As manager of the Cheetah Metapopulation in South Africa, I am in a position to source suitable cheetahs from South Africa. The decision to send cheetahs to India for reintroduction lies with the South Africa government,” Merwe said.

He said the eight cheetahs at KNP were in good health.

KNP Director Uttam Sharma has admitted there were 70 to 80 leopards in the park. An adult cheetah weighs 40 to 50 kg and a leopard between 50 and 60 kg.

Madhya Pradesh is home to 3,421 leopards, the highest in the country, followed by 1,783 in Karnataka, as per the Union Environment Ministry's 'Status of Leopards in India 2018' report.

Merwe said the spotted animals' metapopulation (cheetah count in small and medium parks) has risen to 504 from 217 in South Africa since 2011.

According to Sharma, who also keeps a watch on the Namibian cheetahs at KNP, the large animal can eat as much as 6 to 8 kg meat at one sitting if not chased away.

A cheetah does not return to eat its leftover kill like a leopard or tiger. Suppose a cheetah kills a chital (deer) weighing around 30 kg, it will automatically leave behind around 22 kg meat of the kill for leopards and hyenas, the KNP director explained.

Asked how many days a cheetah eats, Sharma said the world's fastest animal cannot keep its kills safe. Bigger carnivores like leopard and also hyena can snatch kills from cheetahs.

“Even a pack of jackals is believed to be able to snatch a prey from cheetahs,” he said.

A tiger hides its prey in a bush for another day to eat, but this is not the case with a cheetah as its kill gets snatched, the forest officer added.

A full-grown tiger weighing 200 kg eats 18 to 20 kg of its kill at the first go, Sharma said.

In other words, tigers scavenge, while cheetahs are fresh meat eaters, he said.

The eight cheetahs at KNP – five females and three males – are in the 30-66 month age group and named Freddy, Alton, Savannah, Sasha, Obaan, Asha, Cibili and Saisa.

They are currently housed in 6 quarantine 'bomas' (enclosures) and being reared on a diet of buffalo meat, forest department officials have said.

The cheetahs are expected to be put in a bigger enclosure, spread over 5 square kilometers, shortly for acclimatization for two or three months before being released in the wild of KNP, they added.

The acclimatisation zone has been cleared of leopards with the help of elephants. But there was no guarantee leopards will not re-enter the zone as they have the ability to scale and break big fences, said an MP forest department official who did not wish to be identified.

The last cheetah died in India in Koriya district of present-day Chhattisgarh in 1947 and the species was declared extinct in 1952.

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