

# ASIATIC LIONS SIDELINED FOR AFRICAN CHEETAHS

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[The re-introduction of African cheetahs in India's Kuno National park](#), Madhya Pradesh has erupted in a controversy with animal experts and conservationists cautioning against bringing the big cat here.

Ravi Chellam, CEO of Metastring Foundation, wildlife biologist and a conservation scientist during a talk titled, 'Asiatic Lions and African Cheetahs: A Modern-Day Conservation Conundrum' at the Bangalore International Centre, said that not only was bringing the Namibian cheetahs to Kuno unscientific, but also unconstitutional.

The talk, accompanied by a colourful slideshow with pictures from Ravi's personal collection, showed the journey of the tawny cats

Long before the introduction of African Cheetahs was formulated in 2009, Kuno was selected to host a metapopulation of Asiatic lions from Gir in Gujarat.

While most Asiatic Lions are in Sub-saharan Africa, a small population resides in Gujarat's Gir forest. These majestic creatures are often found lounging under banyan trees, walking down dusty roads and even crossing railway tracks that crisscross Gir National Park.

Though the lion population dropped as low as below 20 in the early 1900s, efforts to conserve the only ones left in Gir have produced excellent results.

However, this is not enough.

"Having a metapopulation is like having medical insurance. None of us buys medical insurance thinking we will die or fall sick; it is to have a fallback option if something goes wrong. Suppose there is a cyclone or political upheaval or wildfire or even a disease outbreak, there is evidence that the status of endangered species such as lions, is much better if it has multiple populations," said Ravi.

As one of the foremost wildlife biologists in India, Ravi Chellam was part of the team that surveyed various sites suitable for the translocation of lions. Having zeroed in on Kuno in 1994, he presented the proposal to the government in 1995. The plan was approved.

Kuno, named after a river in north-western Madhya Pradesh, started its preparation to welcome the lions. As many as 24 villages, home to over 1,543 families were displaced, the prey was brought in and the Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary was given the status of a National Park, the strictest type of protected area in India. However, the lions were not transferred.

In answer to a PIL filed in 2006, the Supreme Court in 2013 ordered the translocation of lions from Gir National Park to Kuno National Park within 6 months in letter and in spirit. Nine years have passed since then, and still the lions have not yet arrived in Kuno.

"The delay in the translocation of the Asiatic lions is quite upsetting. The judgement has clearly stated that no state, organisation or person can claim ownership or possession of the wild animals in the forests. It is the state's duty to protect and conserve wildlife to ensure the ecological security of the country," said Ravi.

The judgement also said the introduction of African cheetahs cannot stand in the way of law.

The State government of Gujarat has stalled the translocation of the Asiatic lions on the basis of untenable excuses. It has quoted guidelines from the International Union for Conservation of Nature as a block for the translocation of the lions, according to Ravi.

Taking it a step further, in 2016 the National Tiger Conservation Authority made a plea to the Supreme Court to take another look at the introduction of African cheetahs in India. While making the plea, NTCA noted that the translocation of lions to Kuno would not be adversely affected.

In January 2020, field surveys were conducted in a matter of 12 days. "Six sites were assessed. Some sites were assessed in less than a day. Where was the most time spent? Kuno. Four out of 12 days were spent on a site they said they didn't even need to survey," Ravi told the audience.

Looking at the ecological side of introducing cheetahs, he pointed out glaring inconsistencies in the habitat prepared for the cheetahs.

Cheetahs on average, live at a very low density as compared to other big cats with 1 individual per 100 sq km. To introduce Namibian cheetahs in India successfully, the big cat requires at least 10,000-20,000 square kilometres of land to live comfortably.

These big cats are amongst the most fragile of the big cats whose only edge is their tremendous speed. As the fastest land animal on Earth, cheetahs can cover 100 metres in just three seconds. With a preference for open grasslands (though they can adapt to other ecosystems), they need large swathes of land.

The average female home range of the cheetah is around 760 square kilometres. Though not considered their territory, the home range is the average area cheetahs roam in a year. However, Kuno National Park has a land of only 748 square kilometres. With plans to bring in at 50 cheetahs over the next 5-10 years and have 21 cheetahs as an established population, Kuno National Park is too small to hold a viable population, said Ravi.

"Kuno National Park can accommodate a maximum of 10 cheetahs which in itself is a generous estimate. But is 10 cheetahs a viable population? For a viable population, you need to be talking about 15,000-20,000 square kilometres of habitat. That's the kind of space cheetahs require."

One of the goals that the cheetah introduction plans to achieve is to conserve grasslands and open forest ecosystems. "In saving cheetahs, one would have to save not only its prey-base comprising certain threatened species, but also other endangered species of the grasslands and open forest ecosystems, some of which are on the brink of extinction," reads a government [report](#).

Countering this, Ravi said, "How can 21 cheetahs in Kuno save the thousands of square kilometres that has been classified as wasteland? The open forest and grassland ecosystems are spread throughout the country. These are considered wastelands and are often given for solar and wind energy projects. These cause large scale degradation and fragmentation."

In order to truly conserve grasslands, Ravi suggests scraping the term 'wasteland' to describe the rich bio-diverse ecosystem instead of bringing cheetahs from Africa.

The cheetahs landed in Kuno National Park on September 17.

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