

Project Cheetah, History, Objectives, Significance, Current Status

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Project Cheetah is India's flagship wildlife conservation programme aimed at reintroducing the cheetah, which became **extinct in the country in 1952**. It marks a historic ecological intervention, as India became the **first country in the world** to attempt the reintroduction of an extinct large carnivore through intercontinental translocation.

The project focuses on restoring grassland ecosystems, strengthening biodiversity, and creating a sustainable cheetah population in central India.

History and Background of the Project Cheetah

Cheetahs were once widely distributed across the Indian subcontinent, particularly in grasslands and open forests. However, excessive hunting during the colonial period, loss of habitat, and decline in prey base led to their extinction in India by the mid-20th century.

- In **1952**, the cheetah was officially declared extinct in India.

- Early reintroduction proposals were discussed in the **1970s**, but did not materialise due to ecological and political constraints.
- After extensive scientific studies, India launched **Project Cheetah in 2022**.
- The first batch of **African cheetahs from Namibia** was released into **Kuno National Park**, Madhya Pradesh, followed by a second batch from **South Africa in 2023**.

The project is implemented under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change with technical support from national and international wildlife experts.

Project Cheetah Objectives

The major objectives of Project Cheetah are:

- **Reintroducing cheetahs into India** after a gap of more than 70 years.
- **Establishing a viable, free-ranging cheetah population** that can sustain itself in the long term.
- **Restoring grassland and savannah ecosystems**, which are among the most neglected ecosystems in India.
- **Improving biodiversity conservation** by re-establishing a top predator in the food chain.
- **Promoting eco-tourism and local livelihoods** through community participation.
- **Strengthening India's global leadership** in wildlife conservation and species restoration.

Implementation and Reintroduction Efforts

- **Scientific Planning and Approval:** The project was designed after extensive ecological studies, habitat assessments, and expert consultations to ensure that Indian grasslands and open forests could support cheetahs sustainably.
- **Selection of Suitable Habitats:** Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh was selected as the initial site due to its large grassland area, adequate prey base, low human population pressure, and historical suitability for cheetahs.
- **Inter-Continental Translocation:** African cheetahs were translocated from Namibia in 2022 and South Africa in 2023, marking the world's first inter-continental reintroduction of a large carnivore into its historical range.
- **Phased Introduction Strategy:** Cheetahs were introduced in phases to minimise ecological stress, allowing authorities to monitor adaptation before further releases or expansion to new sites.
- **Soft-Release Method:** Initially, cheetahs were housed in large enclosures (bomas) to help them acclimatise to Indian climate, prey species, and terrain before being released into the wild.
- **Health Screening and Quarantine:** All translocated cheetahs underwent strict health checks, disease screening, and quarantine procedures to prevent the spread of infections and ensure long-term survival.
- **GPS and Satellite Monitoring:** Each cheetah was fitted with a GPS satellite collar to track movement, hunting patterns, territorial behaviour, and habitat use in real time.
- **Veterinary and Field Monitoring:** Dedicated veterinary teams regularly monitored cheetah health, injuries, and stress levels, while field teams tracked behaviour and prey interaction.

- **Breeding and Population Management:** Special attention was given to facilitating natural breeding, resulting in the birth of multiple India-born cubs, a major indicator of successful adaptation.
- **Expansion to New Landscapes:** To reduce pressure on a single habitat, cheetahs were relocated to **Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary in 2025**, initiating the creation of a multi-site cheetah population.
- **Community Involvement:** Local communities were engaged through employment opportunities, awareness programmes, and eco-tourism initiatives to ensure long-term support for conservation.

Current Status of Cheetah in India

As of 2025, Project Cheetah has reached several important milestones:

- **Total Cheetahs:** Around **30 cheetahs** are currently present in India, including both adult translocated cheetahs and India-born cubs.
- **Successful Breeding:** Multiple litters have been born in Kuno, indicating successful adaptation and reproduction.
- **India-Born Cubs:** Nearly **two-thirds of the current cheetah population consists of India-born cubs**, a key indicator of project success.
- **Geographical Spread:**
 - Kuno National Park remains the primary habitat.
 - Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary has emerged as the second cheetah site.
- **Future Target:** Establishing a **metapopulation of 60-70 cheetahs** across interconnected landscapes in central India.

Significance of Project Cheetah for Wildlife Conservation

Project Cheetah holds immense ecological and conservation significance:

- **Ecosystem Balance:** As an apex predator, cheetahs help regulate herbivore populations and maintain trophic balance.
- **Grassland Conservation:** The project brings focus to grasslands, which are often misclassified as wastelands.
- **Biodiversity Enhancement:** Habitat protection for cheetahs benefits multiple species, including birds, ungulates, and small mammals.
- **Scientific Advancement:** Provides valuable data on predator reintroduction, genetics, and habitat management.
- **Socio-Economic Benefits:** Generates employment, promotes eco-tourism, and increases conservation awareness among local communities.
- **Global Conservation Leadership:** Positions India as a leader in ambitious and science-based wildlife restoration efforts.

About Cheetah

The **cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*)** is the **fastest land animal** and a distinctive large cat known for its slender body, long legs, and exceptional speed. Unlike other big cats, cheetahs rely on speed rather than strength to hunt,

making them uniquely adapted to **open grasslands and savanna ecosystems**.

- **Habitat and Distribution:** It inhabits **open grasslands, savannas, and semi-arid regions**, requiring wide open spaces; currently found mainly in **Africa** with a small population in Iran.
- **Hunting Behaviour:** A **diurnal predator**, the cheetah hunts by sight and speed rather than ambush, targeting **medium-sized herbivores** such as antelopes and deer.
- **Reproduction and Gestation:** The **gestation period is about 90-95 days**, with females giving birth to **3-5 cubs**; cub survival depends heavily on habitat safety and prey availability.
- **Male and Female Characteristics:** **Females are solitary** except when raising cubs, while **males often form coalitions**, usually of brothers, to defend territory and improve hunting success.
- **Vocal Behaviour:** Unlike lions, cheetahs **cannot roar** due to a fixed vocal structure; instead, they communicate through **chirps, purrs, growls, and hisses**.

About Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary

- **Location:** Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary is located in **north-western Madhya Pradesh**, along the **Rajasthan border**, and falls within the **Khathiar-Gir dry deciduous forest ecoregion**.
- **Ecosystem:** The sanctuary supports a **diverse mosaic of habitats**, including **savanna landscapes, open grasslands, dry deciduous forests, and riverine ecosystems**. It is also recognised as an **Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA)** due to its rich avifaunal diversity.
- **Topography:** The terrain is characterised by **hills and plateaus**, with the **Chambal River**, a major tributary of the Yamuna, flowing through the sanctuary. The **Gandhi Sagar Dam** further divides the sanctuary into **two nearly equal sections**.
- **Flora:** Vegetation is dominated by **dry deciduous species** such as **Khair, Salai, Tendu**, along with other hardy tree and shrub species adapted to semi-arid conditions.
- **Fauna:** The sanctuary is home to a wide range of wildlife, including **Chinkara, Nilgai, Indian Leopard, Hyena**, and several other mammal and bird species.
- **Historical and Archaeological Sites:** Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary contains significant heritage locations such as **Chaurasigarh, Chaturbhuj Nala rock shelters, Bhadkaji rock paintings**, and the historic **Hinglajgarh Fort**, reflecting its cultural and archaeological importance.
- **Ideal Habitat for Cheetahs:** The presence of **extensive savanna grasslands, suitable prey base, and low forest density** makes the sanctuary an ideal site for cheetah reintroduction, comparable to **savanna ecosystems like the Maasai Mara**, known for supporting large carnivore populations.

About Kuno National Park

- **Location:** Situated in **northern Madhya Pradesh**, near the **Madhya Pradesh-Rajasthan border**, within the Vindhyan landscape.
- **Area:** Covers an area of about **748 square kilometres**, making it one of the largest national parks in central India.

- **River System:** The **Kuno River**, a tributary of the Chambal River, flows through the park and plays a crucial role in maintaining the park's ecosystem and water availability.

- **Ecosystem and Habitat:**

- Dominated by **savanna grasslands, open woodlands, and dry deciduous forests**.
- The habitat structure is ideal for cursorial predators like cheetahs that require open landscapes for high-speed chases.

- **Flora:**

- Vegetation mainly includes **Khair, Kardhai, Salai, Palash, and Tendu** trees.
- The forest type supports both grazing and browsing herbivores.

- **Fauna:**

- Herbivores: **Chital, Sambar, Nilgai, Chinkara, Wild Boar**.
- Carnivores: **Leopard, Indian Wolf, Hyena, Jackal**, and now **Cheetah**.
- Rich bird diversity and reptiles are also found.

- **Prey Base:** Kuno has a well-developed prey base, essential for sustaining large carnivores, making it suitable for long-term cheetah conservation.

Challenges and Criticism of Project Cheetah

Despite its achievements, Project Cheetah faces several challenges:

- **Prey Availability:** Sustaining sufficient prey across multiple sites remains critical.
- **Competition with Leopards:** Overlapping territories create ecological pressure.
- **Initial Mortalities:** Some cheetah deaths occurred due to adaptation stress and natural causes.
- **Habitat Fragmentation:** Long-term success requires landscape connectivity beyond protected areas.
- **Public and Scientific Criticism:** Questions have been raised about suitability of habitats and long-term sustainability.

Way Forward

To ensure long-term success, the following steps are essential:

- **Expansion to Multiple Landscapes** to avoid over-dependence on a single park.
- **Strengthening Prey Base** through habitat improvement and prey augmentation.
- **Developing Wildlife Corridors** for genetic exchange and population stability.
- **Community Participation** through eco-tourism, compensation mechanisms, and awareness programmes.
- **Continuous Scientific Monitoring** and adaptive management based on field data.

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/project-cheetah/>

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