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5 cheetahs from South Africa to be released into the wild in Madhya Pradesh

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Ahead of the release of cheetahs translocated from Namibia into the wild in Madhya Pradesh's Kuno National Park starting next week, forest department officials on Tuesday said that only five of the eight animals will be released as the other three — who have spent much of their lives in captivity — are yet to adapt to their environment.



A Cheetah brought from South Africa released in an enclosure at Palpur, Kuno National Park, Madhya Pradesh, in Sheopur. (PTI)

The five cheetahs, two females and three males, who lived in the wild before they were brought to the country from Namibia, will be released in the first phase, the officials familiar with the matter said.

“Brothers Elton and Freddie, will be released first,” a MP forest official said.

The date of release of the three remaining cheetahs, Sasha, Siyaya and Savannah, has not been decided yet, the officials said, with wildlife experts expressing concerns over their chances of survival.

The cheetahs are currently in hunting enclosures at the park.

“These three may not be able to adjust to the tough wild life (yet). They need to hone their skills,” a forest department official said requesting anonymity.

To be sure, the animals were not bred in captivity, but have spent most of their lives in controlled environments.

Before their translocation, Indian officials had expressed concerns over the adaptability skills of the three cheetahs and sought replacements, a second official, privy to the details of the project, said.

“The officials were concerned over the first intercontinental cheetah project so they raised concerns,” said the forest department official.

Indian wildlife expert YV Jhala, who led the team that visited Namibia ahead of the translocation, had written to the environment ministry in August last year advising that the three cheetahs not be translocated, another official of the forest department said.

The government in Namibia, however, refused to replace the cheetahs, the official said.

Confirming this, Jhala said, "I sent a confidential mail to three environment ministry officers that cheetahs can't hunt, ... (but the), three cheetahs were translocated to India."

NTCA member secretary and cheetah project head SP Yadav did not respond to HT's request for comment.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on September 17 last year released the eight cheetahs from Namibia, in the first leg of the translocation project after a decades-long effort to restore a species that was declared extinct in India in 1952, owing to poaching and shrinking grasslands.

Of the three cheetahs bred in captivity, Sasha suffered a renal infection last month and is now recovering in quarantine, an official of the Cheetah Task Force said.

Siyaya and Savannah are in their 6sq km predator-free enclosures, but they are not yet fit for the wild, the official said.

An expert from Africa said their chances of survival are bleak because they do not know how to defend themselves.

"These three cheetahs are captive cheetahs and have never been in the wild before. If they are released into the wild, their chances of survival will be bleak because they don't know how to save themselves from other wild animals," the cheetah expert said, requesting anonymity.

To be sure, Kuno is largely free of animals that may pose a threat to the cheetahs.

The Cheetah Conservation Fund, the Namibia based wildlife NGO that is part of the project to relocate the big cats in India, and Madhya Pradesh forest department, however, said that the animals are doing well and will be released into the wild after spending more time adapting to the new environment.

"Among the eight, no cheetahs are captive bred and the three had spent most of the time in captivity. Sasha was sick and therefore, was kept in the enclosure. Siyaya and Savanah are doing well but they need to hone their skills better," CCF head Laurie Marker said.

"It's true that these three cheetahs are captive but they are doing well in the enclosure. They are hunting the prey. We will give them some more time to adapt to the habitat and improve their hunting skills," JS Chauhan, MP, principal chief conservator of forest (wildlife), said.

There are 20 cheetahs at the Kuno National Park in Sheopur, after 12 more were brought from South Africa last month. The South African cheetahs are in quarantine at Boma.

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