

The Tribune

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Cheetah's conservation can enrich biodiversity

27 Feb 2023

THE cheetah was a pioneer carnivore of Indian forests, but its domestication and indiscriminate hunting endangered it during the pre-Independence period; it was declared extinct in 1952. At present, it is mostly found in African countries, having a wild population of about 6,500, and in Iran (around 50). The International Union for Conservation of Nature classifies the cheetah as a vulnerable and threatened species, including it in the Red Data Book, thus necessitating its conservation efforts.

To bring cheetahs back into the Indian wilderness, Kuno National Park, Madhya Pradesh, with a suitable habitat and adequate prey base, was selected by the Central Government. This national park also offers prospects for housing the other three big cats — tiger, lion and leopard — which had coexisted in the past in India.

The first batch of eight cheetahs (three males and five females) was flown from Namibia in September last year; they were radio-collared to monitor their activities and behaviour. After local environmental acclimatisation and quarantine, they were released in Kuno in a wild area of 740 sq km to live and prey on their own. These have been found to be moving in groups and preying on antelope, spotted deer and other herbivores, all signs of their successful adaptation.

Twelve cheetahs (seven males and five females) from South Africa arrived earlier this month. After acclimatisation, these, along with already-released cheetahs, would find a place in a larger unfenced landscape of 3,200 sq km at Kuno, having a prey base and carrying capacity of up to 36.

The purpose of bringing cheetahs to India is to facilitate their functional role as a top predator and provide space for their natural expansion, thereby contributing to national and global conservation. To make this effort a success, adequate budgetary provisions have been made and awareness campaigns involving local youth and communities have been initiated. The locals involved in the conservation efforts have been designated as 'Cheetah Mitras' and the local mascot designated as 'Chintu Cheetah'. The local communities are being concurrently educated and empowered for adopting cheetah-friendly practices, such as management of stray dogs and providing alternative livelihoods to reduce pressure on the natural forest ecosystem.

Conservation of this species would not only correct historical lapses and improve biodiversity, but also boost tourism and the local economy. However, as expected, dissenting voices that are raised over any new project have started surfacing, wherein some experts are critical of translocating the African cheetah, a separate subspecies than the Asiatic cheetah that existed in India.

Managerial and financial efforts towards critical management of indigenous wildlife population are being demanded. The carrying capacity of Kuno National Park is being questioned. According to them, it would lead to more man-cattle-cheetah conflicts. Their contention is that cheetahs face direct threats from larger carnivores and stray dogs; hence, Kuno should have been made more secure first for easy adoption of cheetahs. According to them, although Kuno does not have lions or tigers, it has a healthy population of leopards that can pose a threat to cheetah cubs.

Experts who are in favour of introducing and conserving cheetahs insist that it would not only assist in saving their own prey base, but of certain other threatened species too, such as caracal, Indian wolf and three endangered species of the bustard family — the houbara, the lesser florican and most endangered great Indian bustard. This would also aid in perpetuation and conservation of other endangered species of grasslands and open forest ecosystems. After attaining such an envisaged equilibrium and forest ecosystem stability, other big cats can be introduced.

Shifting of villagers out of Kuno National Park will prevent human-cattle-cheetah conflicts. Strict conservation laws in the country that helped in successful implementation of Project Tiger, Project Lion and Project Elephant would guide conservation, protection and perpetuation of cheetahs as well.

The Centre has already constituted a nine-member task force of experts and senior state government officers for continuous monitoring of the health of the cheetahs. It will also ensure adherence to the protocol by forest and veterinary officials. This, besides interaction with 'Cheetah Mitras' and local communities for the next two years, is bound to fix hitches that may crop up during the implementation of the project and take it towards success.

This is the first global intercontinental translocation of a large carnivore. Many animals and plant species in the past have relocated on their own covering vast land surface, rivers and even seas and oceans to settle in new areas and environment. Scientifically, the African subspecies of cheetah would not have any difficulty in adjusting to Indian conditions. After attaining scientific insight into the biological behaviour of plants and animals, including the cheetah, we cannot hope that an extinct species would revive on its own. Even if there are some teething troubles, those can be resolved through scientific inputs. One of the cheetahs on arrival at Kuno was found pregnant; this augurs well for the success of Project Cheetah.

The tiger has served as a flagship and umbrella species of forest systems and the cheetah is bound to fill the void in open forests, savannah and grasslands. Project Cheetah would bring in resources to restore neglected habitats and conserve biodiversity, which would assist in the adaptation of this species. This would also improve the delivery of ecosystem services. Involving local communities in conservation efforts will generate livelihood opportunities, which will not only improve socio-economic conditions and the rural economy but also assist in carbon sequestration to mitigate climate change. The forest ecosystem's stability, achieved with these efforts, would be a step in the direction of envisaging the coexistence of four carnivores — lion, tiger, leopard and cheetah.

Source: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/cheetahs-conservation-can-enrich-biodiversity-483344>