5. Project Cheetah - Environment

India and Botswana formally announced the translocation of eight Cheetahs to India as a part of 'Project Cheetah'

Background

Historical Context

India officially declared the cheetah extinct in 1952 due to decades of intensive hunting by royals and colonial elites, widespread habitat fragmentation caused by agricultural expansion, and a severe decline in prey species such as blackbuck and chinkara. The extinction represented the loss of an entire carnivore guild from India's grassland ecosystems, creating ecological imbalance in semi-arid landscapes.

Global Translocation Milestone - The launch of Project Cheetah in 2022 marked the world's first intercontinental wild carnivore translocation, involving -

1. 8 cheetahs from Namibia (2022)
2. 12 cheetahs from South Africa (2023)
3. 8 cheetahs from Botswana (announced 2025)

Botswana, a country with nearly 70% Kalahari Desert coverage, holds one of the world's largest remaining wild cheetah populations, making it a key conservation partner.

About Project Cheetah

Overview & Implementing Authority - Project Cheetah is India's ambitious initiative to reintroduce cheetahs into suitable grassland and open forest ecosystems after a 70-year absence. Implemented by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), a statutory authority under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, as amended in 2006.

Core Objectives - Establish a viable, self-sustaining, free-ranging cheetah population in India. Restore and manage India's degraded grassland landscapes, which have long been neglected compared to forests. Enhance biodiversity conservation, promote ecotourism, and strengthen local livelihoods.

Unique Global Achievement - This is the first intercontinental relocation of a large wild carnivore ever attempted, involving extensive veterinary protocols, soft-release enclosures, radio-collaring, long-term monitoring, and multi-country collaboration.

Significance of Reintroducing the Cheetah

Ecological Restoration - Cheetahs act as apex or meso-predators depending on the ecosystem and help maintain the structure of grasslands by -

1. Controlling herbivore populations
2. Preventing overgrazing
3. Facilitating nutrient cycling

Their presence is expected to stimulate the recovery of grassland-dependent fauna and flora, aiding in the revival of one of India's most threatened biomes.

Biodiversity & Landscape Conservation - Cheetahs function as -

Flagship species → Symbol for savannah and grassland protection.

Umbrella species → Conservation measures for cheetahs benefit species such as the great Indian bustard, caracal, Indian wolf, and blackbuck.

Rural Livelihoods & Ecotourism - By attracting global interest, Project Cheetah is designed to -

1. Boost tourism revenues
2. Create employment in guiding, hospitality, and wildlife services
3. Support eco-development initiatives for nearby villages

Contribution to Global Conservation - India's attempt helps - Create additional safe habitats for the Vulnerable African cheetah. Reduce extinction risk by creating geographically separated populations. It also brings global attention to the Critically Endangered Asiatic cheetah, now restricted to Iran with fewer than 50 individuals.

Concerns and Challenges

Habitat Suitability & Landscape Limitations - Kuno National Park, though selected for its historical cheetah presence and minimal human disturbance, is relatively small (748 sq. km) for a viable long-term cheetah population. Real expansion requires linking landscapes across Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, which is challenging due to human settlements and fragmented habitats.

High Mortality and Management Issues - Multiple cheetah deaths since 2023 have raised concerns about -

1. Disease screening and quarantine procedures
2. Radio-collar infections
3. Heat stress in summer months
4. Predator conflicts (including leopard competition)
5. Adequacy of fencing and soft-release enclosures

Human–Wildlife Conflict Risks - Cheetahs are more prone to fence-hopping and farmland entry than tigers or leopards. India lacks recent experience in managing cheetah interactions with humans, requiring new protocols for compensation, reporting, and community engagement.

Climate and Ecological Mismatch

African cheetahs are adapted to open savannahs, whereas Indian landscapes are more mosaic-like, with -

1. Mixed grassland-scrub
2. Agricultural patches
3. Denser forests

Some release sites also lack sufficient prey base to sustain multiple cheetah coalitions and breeding females.

About the Cheetah (Expanded)

Species Characteristics - The cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) is the fastest land animal, capable of speeds up to 100–120 km/h. Physiological traits -

1. Lightweight frame
2. Enlarged nasal passages
3. Flexible spine
4. Non-retractable claws for traction

Unlike tigers and lions, cheetahs cannot roar; they communicate through chirps, purrs, and growls.

Species Classification

African Cheetah (Vulnerable) - Estimated 7,000–7,500 individuals. Populations in Namibia, Botswana, South Africa

Asiatic Cheetah (Critically Endangered) - Fewer than 50 individuals. Found only in Iran's central plateau. India cannot import this subspecies due to its precariously low numbers

Conservation Status

The cheetah is the only large carnivore to go extinct in India, making its reintroduction transformative for the country's restoration ecology efforts.

Source - https - //www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-botswana-announce-cheetah-translocation-pact-president-murmu-says-will-take-good-care-of-them/article70271904.ece