

Reintroducing the cheetah in India's grassland – glamour or conservation?

Among the wild cats, cheetah is unique and is the only extant member of the genus *Acinonyx* notable with its non-retractable claws and pads. This fast-running cat derived its name from Sanskrit, *citrakayah*, meaning, the spotted. Like the lion, the cheetah came to India from south-western

Asia by the way of north-western passes, and established in the plains of northern and central parts stretching south up to the Deccan and Mysore¹. Recent genetic study indicates that the last common ancestor of all existing cheetah populations lived in Asia about 11 million years ago².

The fascinating cheetah or hunting leopard was indeed hunted to extinction in the wild in 1952. According to Prater¹, the last authentic record of the cheetah hunting in India was of three males shot together at Bastar District in Madhya Pradesh in 1948.

The cheetah made headlines last year when the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), New Delhi, announced setting aside three grassland sanctuaries to bring the extinct cat back to India³. The cats to be released will be brought from the Middle East where the African cheetahs are bred. The IUCN Guidelines define reintroduction as 'an attempt to establish a species in an area which was once part of its historical range, but from which it has been extirpated or become extinct'⁴. The question, however is, would releasing the cheetah in India that originates from the Middle East be considered a reintroduction?

The Government of India has an ambitious plan to allocate six cheetahs each to two wildlife sanctuaries, viz. Kuno-Palpur and Nauradehi in Madhya Pradesh and Shahgarh landscape in Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan. The MoEF is willing to spend Rs 30 million to restore these sites including the relocation of 23 vil-

lages before the arrival of cheetahs³. If the mission succeeds, it may certainly boost ecotourism and tourists will be fascinated to see the cheetah in the wild.

Nonetheless, some questions remain unanswered. Will the local communities that live in the proposed sites happy to give up their settlements for the cheetah? What are the social, economic and ecological costs and benefits of the cheetah release into the wild? Did the scientific community specialized in wildlife thoroughly debate the pros and cons of the cheetah release? A quick search of the words 'cheetah reintroduction' in the website of *Current Science* journal yielded no relevant discussions till date. Does this project politically motivated to glamorize a few who dream of seeing the cheetah? The Prime Minister's office has recently rejected a proposal to establish a national body to save the elephants. When India is facing difficulties to save natural habitats for the largest herbivore,

should the cheetah dream project worth pursuing?

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1. Prater, S. H., *The Book of Indian Animals*, Bombay Natural History Society, Bombay, 1971.
 2. *Science*, 2006, **311**, 73–77.
 3. Project Cheetah, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, Delhi, 2000.
 4. IUCN Guidelines for Re-introductions, IUCN Species Survival Commission, Gland, 1998.
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