Cheetah Reintroduction Project

Why in news?

Seventy years after being extinct from India, world's fastest land animal Cheetahs walk on the Indian ground once again.

How did cheetahs go extinct in India?

Cheetah

- *Scientific name-* ***Acinonyx jubatus***
- *The planet's fastest land animal*
- *The least dangerous big cat*
- *Population- Around* ***7,100 cheetahs*** *left in the wild*
- *IUCN Status****- Vulnerable***
- ***Appendix I*** *of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)*

- The cheetah has an ancient history, with a Neolithic cave painting of a spotted feline being hunted having been found at Chaturbunj Nala in Mandasur, Madhya Pradesh.
- The name 'cheetah' is believed to have originated from Sanskrit word chitrak, which means 'the spotted one'.
- In India, the cheetah was found from Jaipur and Lucknow in the north to Mysore in the south, and from Kathiawar in the west to Deogarh in the east.
- The cheetah was officially declared extinct by the Indian government in **1952**.
- **Reasons for extinction**
  - Over-hunting
  - Decimation of its relatively narrow prey base species
  - Loss of its grassland-forest habitat

Why is the cheetah being brought back?

- **Cheetah Reintroduction Project**- India carried out negotiations with Iran in 1970s as it was Asiatic.
- But our potential release sites needed upgradations with an increase in prey base and greater protection.
- This is no longer possible as the cheetah population in Iran has dwindled to under 50.
- A plan to reintroduce cheetahs in India was endorsed in 2009 by then Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh.
- However, it was shot down by the Supreme Court in 2013.

- The idea was revived in 2017 by the Narendra Modi government, and the SC cleared the move in 2020 “on an experimental basis”.
- **Kuno-Palpur National Park, Madhya Pradesh** was found to be ready to receive the cheetah immediately, as it had already been prepared for the translocation of Asiatic Lion.
- **Need for reintroduction**- The main objective is
    - To restore India’s historic evolutionary balance
    - To develop a cheetah metapopulation that will help in the global conservation of the animal
- As it is a **flagship species**, the conservation of the cheetah will revive grassland-forests habitat, much like Project Tiger has done for forests.
- The genetic difference between the African and Indian cheetahs is so small, and the ecological functions are practically the same.

What are the concerns with cheetah reintroduction?

- **Gene flow-** The transfer of genetic material from one population to another (Gene flow) is a matter of concern.
- Maintaining genetic diversity and preventing inbreeding is a challenge in such a small group of cheetahs.
- **Habitat and prey base**- The factors that caused a species to go extinct must be dealt with to secure the habitat, before restocking.
- Physical security, enough space, and ample food are the priorities.
- **Landscape viability**- Animals has the possibility to remain susceptible to demographic and environmental events in a broken landscape.
- **Homing instinct**- Most animals have an ability to sense direction and, if displaced, find their way back.
- In the case of big cats, this not only risks losing the released animal from the target site but also causes man-animal conflict.
- **Rehabilitation of people**- The relocation of Bagcha residents in Madhya Pradesh has spurred up fights for their rights.
- Bagcha village is dominated by Sahariya adivasis falling under the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG).

References

1. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/what-takes-successfully-move-big-cats-cheetahs-natural-habitats-8153494/
2. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-cheetah-relocation-extinction-narendra-modi-explained-8155532/
3. https://indianexpress.com/article/india/cheetah-reintroduction-project-ready-for-relocation-bagcha-villagers-put-up-fight-for-rights-8156161/

Quick facts

- **Metapopulation**- A group of populations or subpopulations that occupy spatially distinct habitat patches that are close enough to support dispersal among patches.
- **Inbreeding**- The mating of individuals or organisms that are closely related through common ancestry.
- **Genetic diversity**- It is the diversity or variability within species, community or assemblage. The combined differences in the DNA of all individuals in a species make up the genetic diversity of that species.
- **Gene flow (Gene migration)**- The transfer of genetic material from one population to another.

