Importing African Cheetahs

Why in News?

The Supreme Court (SC) has recently given a green signal to introduction of African Cheetahs in a suitable area in India.

What is the story behind?

- This signal has revived a decade-long debate over the controversial plan first floated in 2009 and shot down by the SC in 2013.
- Cheetahs are the only large carnivore to have gone extinct in India.
- In 2009, the then Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh cleared a proposal to import a few cheetahs back in the Indian wild.
- At a 2009 meeting, the Namibia-based Cheetah Conservation Fund offered to help bring in African cheetahs in stages over the next decade, possibly starting in early 2012.
- By 2010, India's cheetah plan was ready and the Centre approved Rs 50 crore for the programme in 2011.

What were the obstacles?

- The matter of import came up before the SC during a hearing on shifting few lions from Gujarat to Kuno-Palpur wildlife sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh.
- It was also one of the sites identified for releasing Cheetahs.
- In 2012, the SC stayed the cheetah plan and in 2013, it ordered translocation of lions while quashing the plan to introduce African cheetahs to Kuno-Palpur.
- The cheetah plan was revived in 2017 when the government sought the SC permission to explore possibilities to reintroduce cheetahs from Africa to suitable sites other than Kuno-Palpur.

Which place will be the first host?

- In April 2013, the SC had set a 6-month deadline for trans-locating lions from Gujarat to Madhya Pradesh.
- Instead, the 3rd National Wildlife Action Plan (2017-2031) released in

2017 said that the identification of an alternative home for the Asiatic lion will be completed during 2018-2021.

- Then, **Kuno** resurfaced as a potential cheetah site in the court.
- But, much of its grasslands have naturally progressed to woodlands, they are not suitable for the African import.
- In the sanctuary, there is barely any presence of the four-horned antelope, chinkara or blackbuck - potential prey for the cheetah.
- **Nauradehi** in Madhya Pradesh will be the host to the first batch of imported animals, as other sites were not feasible.

What is the argument against this host place?

- Wolves are the keystone species in Nauradehi and would have to compete with cheetahs.
- The majestic GIB is a potential prey for the cheetah.
- Putting the cheetah in with the bustard cannot be contemplated, because of the threat to this most gravely endangered bird.
- The project excluded Jaisalmer's Desert National Park, a potential host.
- Yet, it recommended erstwhile GIB habitats for the cheetah, in effect denying the bird any chance of habitat recovery.
- There is a lopsided focus on flying in an exotic species as a replacement for what was long gone, at the cost of undermining the future of an indigenous species that is still around.
- This is one of the reasons why the SC scrapped this plan in 2013.

What could be done?

- The GIB is not the only species staring down the barrel.
- The government has identified 20 others species that need immediate help to survive and it should work on protecting them.
- A three-member expert panel will examine the issues for the government to reach a considered decision on the importing issue.
- Meanwhile, as the policy dash for the fastest land animal is being cheered, the lions are running out of time.
- They also need to be given importance.

Source: The Indian Express



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