One Year of Project Cheetah

Why in news?

Recently, 1 year anniversary of India's cheetah reintroduction programme was observed with the 1st batch of 8 cheetahs from Namibia arrived on September 17, 2022.

Why is the cheetah being brought back?

- **Asiatic cheetahs** – Once abundant in India, cheetah was officially declared *extinct* by the Indian government in *1952.*
    - **Reasons** - Over-hunting, decimation of its relatively narrow prey base species and loss of its grassland-forest habitat.
- **Cheetah Reintroduction**– India carried out negotiations with Iran in 1970s for reintroducing Asiatic Cheetah but it didn't take off.
- In 2009, a plan was endorsed to reintroduce Cheetahs in India but it was shot down by the Supreme Court.
- Later, in 2020, the Supreme Court cleared the move on an experimental basis.
- **Need for introduction**– To establish a viable cheetah metapopulation in India and provides space for the expansion of the cheetah within its historical range.
- As it is a *flagship species*, the conservation of the cheetah will revive grassland-forests habitat.

What is Project Cheetah?

- Project Cheetah is India's cheetah relocation programme and the 1st intercontinental reintroduction of a wild, large carnivore species.
- **Aim**- To bring in 5-10 animals every year, over the next decade, until a self-sustaining population of cheetahs is established.
- **Reintroduction-** The *African cheetahs* are translocated from the forests of South Africa and Namibia to the *Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh.*
- **Implementing body -** The *National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)* under the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and And Climate Change
- **Assisted by** - The Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF)

To know more about Cheetah reintroduction programme, click here

Status of Project Cheetah

- **Total Imports** – 20 adult African cheetahs have been imported so far.
- **Death** – Of the 20 adult cheetahs imported, 6 of the 12 cheetahs which came from

Africa have died.
- Additionally, 3 of the four cubs have died and the only remaining cub is being hand reared as its mother has rejected it.
- **Current status** - The surviving 14 adult cheetahs and 1 cub are in captivity.
- The current status doesn't indicate any progress to achieve the stated goal of Project Cheetah.
- **Additional sites being prepared** – *Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary and Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary*, both in Madhya Pradesh.

Why are the reasons attributed to the death of Cheetahs?

- **Premedical condition** – The 1st cheetah which died is said to have a renal condition even before translocation.
- **Extreme weather conditions** – The death of the cubs born in India are attributed to heat wave conditions.
- **Captive conditions** – One of the females died when authorities attempted to get the cheetah to mate inside the enclosure.
- **Organ failure** –Cardio-pulmonary failure is another cause but what caused it has still not been determined.
- **Unknown causes** – The last three deaths occurred during the monsoon with no definite cause.

What are the issues associated?

- **Higher quarantine time** – It took more than 50 days for the first two cheetahs and more than 70 days for the last of the eight cheetahs to be released into larger enclosure.
- It is not clear if scientific assessments of prevalence of diseases were carried out and what the results were, as there is nothing in the public domain.
- **Faulty selection process** – It allowed the import of animals which were ill and behaviorally unfit for release in the wild.
- 3 of the eight cheetahs that were part of the first batch of cheetahs from Namibia, did not meet the criteria prescribed in the Action Plan.
- **No separation of male and female –** Certain events like the birth of a litter, the fatal mauling of a female by two males and the death of a male while a female was in the same enclosure was against the given norms.
- **Implementation failure** – Neither the mentioned timelines nor the stated sequence of release has been followed.
- **Impact on other endangered species –** It probably diverted financial resources from much needed conservation projects like the Great Indian Bustard and the translocation of Asiatic lions.
- **Habitat conservation**- Given the challenges that the cheetahs have faced in surviving even in captivity and the lack of suitable habitats for them, using African cheetahs to conserve grasslands and grassland-dependent species is clearly a faulty strategy.

What lies ahead?

- Need to incorporate the best available scientific knowledge in planning, implementation and monitoring of a project of this scale.
- Focus on the establishment of high-quality habitats covering at least 5,000 square kilometres before bringing more cheetahs from Africa.

Cheetahs are a low-density species, existing at best at 1-2 per 100 sq km and with a unique spatial ecology. The introduced cheetahs will need about 5,000 sq km of good-quality habitat to establish a viable population in India.

- Make wider consultation involving scientists and conservationists.
- Authorities need to reassess the approach to prevent deaths, especially when the animals are in captivity.
- Be cognizant of the effects of long periods of captivity on the fitness of these cats to be released to run free in the wild.
- Need to determine if the African cheetahs are susceptible to certain insects and parasites in India, and if the radio collars provide a micro-environment conducive for these to thrive.

Quick Facts

Action Plan for Cheetah Reintroduction in Indian States

- Quarantine for *30 days* in a predator-proof enclosure at the site of release.
- Monitor animals for manifestation of any sickness as per the regulation of import of live animals under the *Livestock-Importation Act, 1898.*
- Do a scientific assessment to establish the prevalence of potential carnivore pathogens/diseases at the release sites.
- The selection of animals suitable for release will be verified by CTF/WII after necessary vaccinations and health checks.
- Separation of male coalitions and females in adjoining compartments so that they can know each other before release.
- Radio-collared male (coalitions) would be released from the holding enclosure first after an appropriate period (1 to 2 months).
- The females shall be released, after radio collaring, 1-4 weeks after the males.

References

1. The Hindu| One year report of Project Cheetah
2. IE| Deviations from Action Plan



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