



Tuesday, Apr 25, 2023

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Premium

What causes cheetah deaths, and why confining them may not help

Holding and handling caused 1 in every 7 cheetah deaths in small South African reserves, shows study from 2018

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New Delhi | Updated: April 25, 2023 07:53 IST





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Of the 20 cheetahs brought to India from Africa in the world's first intercontinental translocation project, 18 now remain. (Representational image)

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One of the 12 cheetahs flown in from South Africa in February, a six-year-old male named Uday, **died** in Kuno National Park on Sunday (April 23) morning.

Only days ago, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan had asked the state forest department to prepare Gandhisagar Wildlife Sanctuary as the second home for the spotted cats to relieve pressure on Kuno.

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Of the 20 cheetahs brought to India from Africa in the world's first intercontinental translocation project, 18 now remain. Five-year-old Sasha, one of the eight cheetahs that arrived from Namibia last September, died on March 27.

Were these unfortunate cheetah deaths unexpected?

The Cheetah Project did anticipate high mortality. The criteria for the project's short-term success was only "50% survival of the introduced cheetah for the first year". That would be 10 out of 20.

The project, however, came under pressure after a number of experts pointed out that it had overestimated Kuno's carrying capacity for cheetahs. The field experience of the project staff at Kuno also back this assessment.

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As a result, the Madhya Pradesh government set a six-month deadline for readying Gandhisagar — in the Chambal river valley in Mandsaur and Nimach districts — for the cheetahs. There is also talk about moving a few animals from Kuno to the safety of an 80-sq-km fenced area in Rajasthan's Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve.

The focus, therefore, is shifting from the project's stated purpose — that of establishing the cheetah in an open landscape as a free-roaming and self-sustaining population occupying thousands of square miles — to managing the African imports as a few pocket populations in fenced-in or restricted areas.

So is shifting the goalpost a viable step?

In the absence of natural dispersal, managing a meta-population involves moving suitable individuals from one pocket population to another to maintain genetic viability. Studies on similar efforts elsewhere offer useful insights.

In 2018, a study documented how meta-population management conserved a declining population of 217 cheetahs in 40 small populations in South Africa.

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In 2009, 40 fenced reserves in South Africa held only 289 cheetahs even though as many as 343 were translocated to 48 fenced reserves from Namibian and South African ranches since 1965. Once the supply was stopped in 2009, numbers further fell to 217 by 2012.

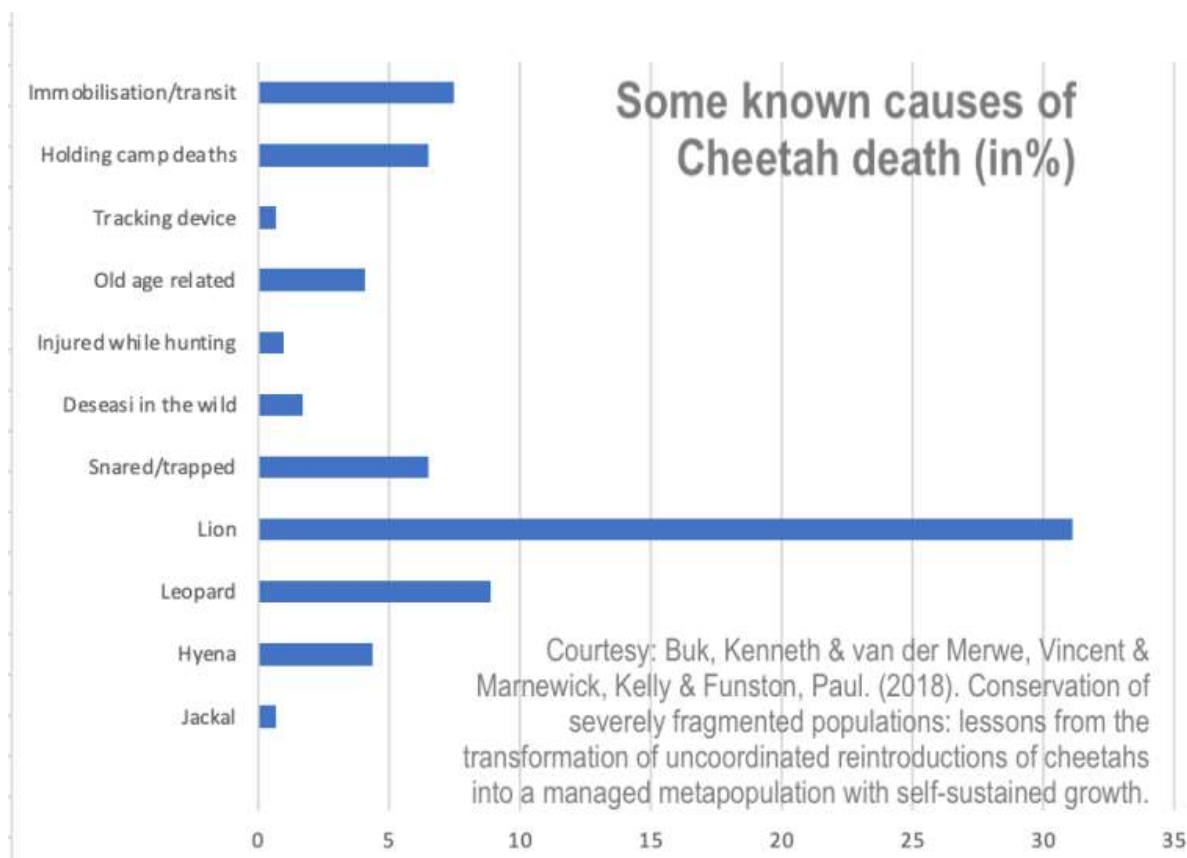
At that stage, the key conservation problems (such as high lion density) were identified and addressed before shuffling cheetahs from one pocket population to other.

In six years, the meta-population grew to 328 cheetahs, offering a viable roadmap for the South African model of conserving animals in fenced reserves in regions with dense human populations blocking natural gene flow.

And how do cheetahs die?

The South African study also documented the causes of mortality, where it could be established, for 293 cheetah deaths.

It found that holding camps caused 6.5% of cheetah deaths, immobilisation/ transit caused 7.5% deaths, and another 0.7% were caused by tracking devices. This added up to almost 15% — so, one in every seven cheetah deaths was attributed to handling and management.



Predation turned out to be the biggest killer in the study, accounting for 53.2% of cheetah mortality. Lions, leopards, hyenas, and jackals were primarily responsible. Several other wildlife including warthogs, baboons, snakes, elephants, crocodiles, vultures, zebras, and even ostriches killed cheetahs.

It is well documented that cheetahs suffer very high cub mortality — up to 90% in protected areas — mainly due to predation. Consequently, nearly 80% of all cheetahs throughout their range in Africa are found living outside of protected parks and reserves.

In Africa, the lion is the chief predator of cheetahs; in India, where lions are absent except in Gujarat, leopards are likely to slip into that role in potential cheetah landscapes.

It is certainly not viable to keep cheetahs in leopard-proof enclosures in the long run. The strategy of restricting them to sanctuaries and national parks by repeated

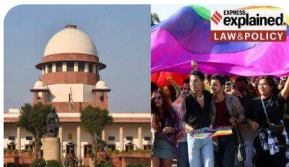
sedate-and-recover interventions is fraught with the risk of harming the animals, project experts have conceded.

So what options are available to the project now?

The Cheetah Project can choose to cut the risk by settling for the South African model of retaining a few pocket populations in fenced-in reserves. But if it chooses not to make this compromise, the project does face an uphill task.

The project does not seem to have carried out the necessary groundwork before bringing in the animals, and it has to now race against time to find a way for people and cheetahs to share space in the central Indian landscape.

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In the long run, the success — or failure — of the cheetah project will be determined within the framework of India's traditional conservation ethos that envisages protecting naturally dispersing wildlife in viable non-fragmented habitats.

First published on: 24-04-2023 at 16:16 IST



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