

Project Cheetah: Where things stand after two years

The ambitious project has seen marginal successes. But major questions remain regarding its short and long term outlook

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The Cheetahs were released in Kuno National Park, Madhya Pradesh, on September 17, 2022 by PM Modi. (Photo: PMO/Wikimedia Commons)

Project Cheetah, which saw the introduction of the African sub-species of the wild cat in India, [completed two years on September 17](#).

The ambitious project has two overarching objectives. First, to establish a stable, breeding population of cheetahs in central India. Two, to use cheetahs as an umbrella species to restore open natural ecosystems such as scrubs, savannahs, grasslands, and degraded forests.

Two years in, Project Cheetah has seen marginal successes. Many challenges remain, as well as questions regarding its long-term outlook. Here is a status check.

24 cheetahs survive

Project Cheetah began with the intercontinental translocation of African cheetahs from Namibia and South Africa to the Kuno National Park in [Madhya Pradesh](#). This translocation took place in two batches of eight and then 12 cheetahs.

These cheetahs were initially kept in soft-release bomas, small enclosures inside the national park to get them adapted to the local environment. Although confined to an area of roughly 1 sq km, the cheetahs hunted live prey inside these bomas. While some cheetahs were later released in the wild, they were later brought back into the enclosures. Mating within the translocated cohort of cheetahs led to the birth of 17 cubs.

Of the 20 translocated cheetahs, eight (40 per cent) have died due to a variety of reasons, from attacks during mating to septicaemia caused by tick infestation under the cheetahs' radio collars. Of the 17 cubs, five (29 per cent) have also perished. As of today, 24 cheetahs (12 adults and cubs each) survive.

The next batch of 6-8 African cheetahs will be translocated to the Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary, also in Madhya Pradesh.

Cheetahs still not in wild

The project has seen marginal successes, mainly on two fronts. First, with respect to the successful breeding of the African cheetahs in a new climate and ecology, and the survival of 12 out of the 17 cubs born. Second, Pawan and Veera, who were released into the wild last December spent a considerable amount of time in a free range, and travelled to far-off distances north of Kuno, even entering [Rajasthan](#).

However, the project faced a significant setback in August this year when Pawan was found dead ostensibly due to drowning (the autopsy report has not yet been made public). After this incident, all 24 surviving cheetahs have been put in enclosures. This has raised questions about the spotted felines' capabilities to establish their own habitat in the wild. Authorities say that more cheetahs will be released after the monsoon season.

But conservation scientists have criticised the delay in releasing the cheetahs into the wild, and questioned authorities' lack of transparency in the matter. Ravi Chellam, a Bengaluru-based wildlife biologist and conservation scientist, said that a Namibian policy states that large wild carnivores should not be kept in captivity for more than three months. Beyond this period, the carnivore should either be euthanised or held in captivity permanently.

Barring the late Pawan and Veera, who is now in an enclosure, all the other cheetahs have been in enclosures for over a year now. This is contrary to the government's own Cheetah Action Plan which had said that cheetahs will be released in the wild after a 4-5 week quarantine period, followed by a 1-2 month acclimatisation period, according to Chellam.

Problem of inadequate prey

A deficit in the prey base is one of the biggest challenges facing the project. The project's latest annual report has found that the density of chital, the primary prey for cheetahs (and leopards), has declined from 23.43 animals per sq km in 2021 to 17.5 animals per sq km in 2024. The current population of chital in Kuno National Park is about 6,700.

This is far less than the numbers required to sustain the 91 leopards and 12 adult cheetahs in the park. The leopard population would need about 23,600 prey animals and cheetahs about 3,120 prey animals, annually. "With the current population of chital (6700), and other prey (about 100 ungulates), there is a huge deficit of prey in Kuno National Park," Project Cheetah's annual report said.

The report has prescribed immediate intervention by way of prey augmentation at Kuno as well as Gandhi Sagar, the next home for cheetah translocation. According to Chellam, this reflects poorly on the project management given that in 2022, Kuno was specifically chosen due to its prey density. "What has happened to drastically change the ground situation in such a short period of time?", he asked.

Road ahead

Experiences from the project so far have shown that the free-ranging cheetahs often ventured far and wide, often crossing state boundaries or entering human habitats. An analysis of their movements using radio collars showed that Veera travelled a distance of 5.82 km daily, while Pawan travelled 4.75 km daily, on average. Veera often ventured into territorial forests outside the national park. These insights have brought into spotlight the interstate landscape conservation plans.

Conservation of the interstate Kuno-Gandhi Sagar landscape spread over the protected areas, territorial forests of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan has been spelt out as the

way forward to establish a population of 60-70 cheetahs in the region. This would be subject to measures such as prey management, setting up of an adequate mechanism for interstate coordination, and the protection of the open ecosystem habitat.

This large landscape criss-crosses several forested patches outside sanctuaries, parks and tiger reserves, and is spread over eight districts of Madhya Pradesh and seven districts of Rajasthan. The conservation of this landscape would be a herculean task as it would involve restoring the habitats adequately, and ensuring that risks to cheetahs are minimised before they can populate the space.