

Why are cheetahs facing the threat of extinction?

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Prime Minister released cheetahs brought from Namibia in Africa in Kuno National Park (KNP) in Madhya Pradesh.



[Ref-Outlook India]

Current status of Cheetahs

- In India, the native cheetah species was the **Asiatic cheetah**, which went extinct in 1952.
 - Currently, only **Iran has Asiatic cheetahs** in the wild, numbering around 12.
- According to the **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)**, cheetahs are mainly present in **southern African countries** such as Algeria, Botswana, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe, among others.
 - Since the 1940s, the cheetah **has gone extinct in 15 countries** – Jordan, Iraq, Israel, India, Morocco, Syria, Oman, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Ghana, Nigeria, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Why do only African and Asiatic cheetahs remain in the wild?

- A popular theory on cheetahs' evolution says they descended from the same ancestor as the American puma, another big cat.
 - This implies cheetahs were **not limited to two continents** at that point.
 - The extinction of these early cheetah species left only the Asian and African populations of cheetahs.

Cheetahs in India

- The cheetah has an ancient history in the country, with a Neolithic cave painting of a 'slender spotted feline being hunted' having been found at Chaturbunj Nala in Mandasur, Madhya Pradesh.
- In India, the animal 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**.

Why do so few Asiatic cheetahs remain?

- Earlier, the populations of the **Asiatic cheetahs stretched from the Arabian Peninsula to the**

Indian subcontinent.

- A little smaller than its African cousin, the Asiatic cheetah has faced numerous threats to its survival.
- The biggest threat is human intervention, as happened in India.
 - **Over-hunting** at the hand of kings, the British, as well as herders who wanted to prevent attacks on their sheep and other animals, was a major factor.
 - **The loss of the wide expanse needed for cheetahs' health and survival**, as more and more land got converted into agricultural land, was another reason.
 - **Smaller animals, their sources of prey**, also reduced in numbers as forest areas were converted.
 - In modern-day Iran, the **animals often get hit by vehicles close to their areas**, as they are prone to moving beyond the zones, they are placed in.

Why is the cheetah vulnerable today?

- The Cheetah is **assessed as Vulnerable by the IUCN**.
- Under its Red List, which studies and notifies the decline in a species' population, it comes under the '**vulnerable**' category meaning it is not very far off from the threat of being extinct in wild.
- Apart from the threats traditionally faced, **climate change** is further changing the habitats of cheetahs.
- **Poaching** is done for the animal's fur, while illegal smuggling happens due to demand for the big cats as pets in some regions.

Why is the cheetah being brought back?

- To restore India's '**historic evolutionary balance**'.
- To **develop a cheetah 'metapopulation'** that will help in the global conservation of cheetah.
- To help conservation efforts in Africa, in particular South Africa.
 - **The South African cheetah population had dwindled** two decades ago, before the conservation program ensured that the numbers increased – of the global cheetah population of 7,000, 4,500 belong to South Africa.
- As it is a flagship species, the conservation of the cheetah will revive **grassland forests and its biome and habitat**, much like Project Tiger has done for forests.
 - **Project Tiger** has also resulted in the **conservation of 250 water bodies** found in India's 52 Tiger Reserves.

Earlier attempts to bring back the cheetah

- India's first attempt to bring back the cheetah was in the early 1970s.
- While attempts to relocate cheetahs to India began in 2009, it was only in 2020 that the **Supreme Court of India finally gave the green signal for such efforts**.

African Cheetah

- It is spread out across Africa from **Northwest Africa, East Africa, and Southern Africa**.
- It has a light brown to **golden brown fur colour that is thicker than the Asiatic ones**.

Conservation Status

- **IUCN**- Vulnerable
- **CITES**- Appendix I