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A cheetah after being released inside a special enclosure of the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh on September 17. | Photo Credit: PTI

**The story so far:** This year marked [the arrival of Namibian cheetahs to India](#), the first intercontinental transfer of wild cats into the country since independence. Eight cheetahs were flown into the Kuno National Park (KNP), Madhya Pradesh, from Namibia on September 17 as part of an ambitious [project to introduce the big cat into the country](#). They were released into the quarantine zone at the KNP [by Prime Minister Narendra Modi](#). In February, the government went public with a plan to import a cohort of animals that could live in India, setting up a task force to implement the programme.

The cheetahs — five females and three males — were flown into India following several weeks of medical supervision in Namibia. They will be released into the wild gradually so that they have enough time to adapt to Indian conditions, are at reduced risk of contracting and spreading infection and have honed the skills to hunt Indian prey. The eight cheetahs were housed in six 'bomas' (enclosures) and initially provided with buffalo meat. So far, three of the animals have been released into a larger enclosure outside of the 'bomas' after two of them — Freddie and Elton — successfully killed chital for prey in November. The third animal, Oban, was also released mid-November and all the animals are expected to be moved inside larger enclosures in weeks. The cheetahs are radio-collared and their movements will be tracked. Each animal has a dedicated tracking team. A team of wildlife scientists, biologists, and Laurie Marker, a renowned zoologist and founder of the Cheetah Conservation Fund, is monitoring the initiative.

Cheetahs were once widespread in India as well as in many parts of the world until they were hunted to extinction. Only around 8,000 of them survived, and overwhelmingly in Namibia and South Africa. A different species, called the Asiatic cheetah, once abundant in India, is found in Iran. As part of improving their odds of long-term survival, young animals are being reared as part of conservation efforts in Namibia and then sent to different parts of the world, including India. While it is still early days for the cheetah, [experts have raised concerns](#) that the KNP has limited space for the cheetah to co-exist with other predators such as tigers and lions, for which the KNP was originally prepared.

Every four years, India carries out a census of the tiger population across India. The latest

estimate put the tiger population at 2,967. Tigers were reportedly increasing at a rate of about 6% per annum and the area that they occupied was roughly stable, at about 89,000 square km since 2014. These numbers are estimated using a sophisticated system that involves photographing animals via camera traps as well as mathematical analysis. In 2006, India had 1,411 tigers. This rose to 1,706 in 2010 and 2,226 in 2014 on the back of improved conservation measures and new estimation methods.

The consistent implementation of Project Tiger since 1973, whereby dedicated tiger reserves were established in India, as well as anti-poaching measures have played a significant role in tiger conservation. India has 53 tiger reserves with the latest being added early this year. However, rising tiger numbers have meant that nearly half the tigers are now outside designated protected zones that lead to increasing instances of human-animal conflict.

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