

CHEETAHS MAY BE FLOWN IN FROM NEW COUNTRIES

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A cheetah after its release inside a special enclosure of the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh on September 17, 2022. Photo: PMO via PTI

With [six adult cheetahs dying](#) within the first year of their relocation to India, wildlife experts associated with Project Cheetah are considering options of importing the next batch of big cats from countries other than South Africa and Namibia. A final decision is awaited.

Though it was expected that future batches of the animals would be brought from South Africa and Namibia — the result of extensive discussions with both countries and agreements at the highest diplomatic levels — experts privy to the goings-on in matters of Project Cheetah told *The Hindu* that the experience with the animals over the past year were prompting a rethink.

A major factor was some of the animals' vulnerability to infections from their biological proclivity to generate 'winter coats' during the summer and monsoon months in India.

A biological adaptation to winter, the covering in the wet and humid conditions of India proved to be detrimental as it facilitated fatal infections that may have killed at least two of the animals. With South Africa and Namibia being in the Southern Hemisphere, there are concerns that future batches of cheetahs from these countries could be similarly vulnerable.

"The development of a winter coat is a serious problem. In future, we will likely import animals that are less prone to developing them," said S.P. Yadav, Member Secretary of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), who is closely involved with Project Cheetah.

"At present, we are looking at South Africa as even the President of South Africa has committed to providing the animals. We need 12 to 14 animals a year but if we need more, we can consider even animals outside these countries. Our agreement with all countries stand. Also, not all animals from South Africa and Namibia have a winter coat issue."

The location for the future batches of animals would be the Gandhi Sagar Park in Madhya Pradesh. All the cheetahs relocated to India from South Africa and Namibia so far have been put at the Kuno National Park in the same State.

Another official associated with a key committee linked to Project Cheetah said that a decision to

import South African cheetahs had not been “finalised” though the winter coat was a “prominent” factor before the steering committee tasked with charting the future of Project Cheetah.

“It will be many months before the next batch comes as Gandhi Sagar — though an excellent park with natural savannah grass — still needs quite a lot of preparation. We have to ensure that the next set of cheetahs that come in have access to adequate prey,” the official told *The Hindu*.

Another factor weighing on the experts is that despite a year in India, most of the animals continue to be in enclosures.

“We could also consider cheetahs from the Northern Hemisphere (Kenya, which partly lies in the Northern Hemisphere) that are free-ranging and more likely to adapt to Indian conditions,” the official said.

Several of the cheetahs currently at Kuno have been bred in captivity and reportedly have not fully adapted to the forests in India. Currently, all the cheetahs have been moved to large enclosures and are expected to be released into the wild with the onset of winter next month.

Another expert privy to the project said that other than the home country, factors such as logistics, age, and gender would be considered before a decision to finalise the next batch of cheetahs was taken in December or January.

“There is a suggestion to consider animals outside these two countries but the logistics are daunting and involves diplomatic and political factors. The winter coat issue has surprised everyone, including the African experts, and we would prefer animals resilient to this. However, we have time until December or January-next for considering the next batch and will weigh many factors,” the expert said.

A year after Prime Minister Narendra Modi released the first of eight African cheetahs, flown from Namibia into enclosures at the Kuno National Park, the plan was to have the animals — later joined by a cohort of 12 cheetahs from South Africa — range in the 748 square kilometres of the park. However a year down, six of the 20 animals have died and of the quartet of the first litter born to one of the animals, three succumbed to Kuno’s heat, with the surviving animal being hand-reared by the park officials.

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