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Project Cheetah Gets Its Biggest Batch: Nine from Botswana, and What Comes Next

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WHY IN NEWS

Nine cheetahs translocated from Botswana arrived at Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh — the third and largest international batch under Project Cheetah. With 29 Indian-born cubs already at Kuno, the total cheetah population in India has crossed 48, marking a significant milestone in the programme launched in September 2022.

The arrival of nine cheetahs from Botswana at **Kuno National Park** in Madhya Pradesh marks a significant moment in India's ambitious wildlife reintroduction experiment. With a total population now approaching 50 individuals — including 29 Indian-born cubs — Project Cheetah has moved beyond its uncertain early days into a phase where the central challenge has shifted from "will they survive?" to "can they thrive and expand?"

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHEETAH'S DISAPPEARANCE FROM INDIA

The cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) has a long and melancholy history on the Indian subcontinent. Mughal emperors, particularly Akbar, kept over a thousand cheetahs for coursing (hunting with trained animals). Historical records suggest cheetahs were once distributed across the open grasslands of the Deccan Plateau and central India.

By the 20th century, numbers had collapsed due to:

Habitat loss: Conversion of grasslands and open scrublands to agriculture

Prey base depletion: Hunting of chinkara, blackbuck, and other prey species

Direct hunting: Cheetahs were shot by zamindars and colonial hunters

Capture for coursing: The practice of capturing wild cheetahs for use as hunting animals meant no breeding population was sustained in the wild

The last confirmed sighting of a wild cheetah in India was in **1947**, when **Maharaja Ramanuj Pratap Singh Deo of the Korea princely state** (in present-day Chhattisgarh) shot what are believed to be the **last three individuals** in the Ramgarh area of northern Korea — ending the Asiatic cheetah's presence on Indian soil after thousands of years. The cheetah was officially declared extinct in India in **1952**. The Asiatic cheetah

(*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) — the subspecies that historically lived in India — is today critically endangered, with only an estimated **12–17 individuals** surviving in Iran (as per Iran's Environmental Protection Organization, March 2025), all confined to a few protected areas in Iran's central-eastern deserts.

WHY AFRICAN CHEETAHS?

Since the Asiatic cheetah is functionally extinct (and Iran has declined to share its remnant population), India made the controversial decision to introduce the **African cheetah** (*Acinonyx jubatus jubatus*) instead. This raised significant scientific debate:

Arguments for:

- African and Asiatic cheetahs are genetically very close (diverged relatively recently in evolutionary terms)
- Both subspecies are ecologically similar in behaviour, prey preferences, and habitat use
- The African cheetah would fulfil the *ecological role* of the cheetah in Indian ecosystems — controlling populations of medium-sized herbivores — even if it is not the original subspecies
- With no viable Asiatic cheetah population available, waiting indefinitely means the grassland ecosystem continues without its apex predator

Arguments against:

- Different subspecies; not a "restoration" in the strict sense
- India's climate, disease landscape, and prey base differ from African savannah; adaptation challenges are real
- The deaths of several cheetahs in the first two years raised questions about veterinary preparedness

THE THREE TRANSLOCATION BATCHES

Batch	Origin	Arrival	Individuals
First	Namibia	September 2022	8 (5 female, 3 male)
Second	South Africa	February 2023	12 (7 female, 5 male)
Third	Botswana	2026	9
Indian-born cubs	Kuno NP	2023–2026	29
Current total			**~48**

The first year was difficult. By early 2024, several cheetahs had died — from septicaemia, radio-collar-related infections, territorial fights, and other causes. Each death generated intense media scrutiny and criticism of the programme. The government and **NTCA (National Tiger Conservation Authority)** maintained that

some mortality was expected in any reintroduction programme and that the birth of cubs on Indian soil was the meaningful benchmark.

The 29 Indian-born cubs — cheetahs that have never lived anywhere but India — are the programme's most significant achievement. They represent a self-sustaining trajectory: the beginning of a population that could eventually survive without further international transfers.

WHY BOTSWANA SPECIFICALLY?

Botswana's cheetah population (~1,700 individuals) represents approximately **24% of the global cheetah population** of ~7,100, making it the most cheetah-rich country on Earth. More importantly, **76.9% of Botswana's cheetahs live outside protected areas** — on commercial cattle ranches and farmlands. The human-cheetah coexistence model in Botswana is actively studied and promoted by **Cheetah Conservation Botswana (CCB)**, which runs the **Botswana Cheetah Conservation Programme**, implementing livestock protection measures, community education, and conflict mitigation protocols.

This is extraordinary from a conservation biology perspective. It means Botswana's cheetahs have demonstrated the ability to coexist with human land use at scale. For India — where protected areas are surrounded by densely populated agricultural landscapes — this is directly relevant. The cheetahs eventually released into India's peri-protected landscapes will need to navigate human-dominated terrain. Botswana's wild population is proof that this is biologically possible.

Botswana has also developed sophisticated **human-cheetah conflict mitigation** protocols: livestock guardian dogs, night kraals (enclosures), community-based ranger networks, and economic compensation schemes. India's wildlife managers have been studying these models for adaptation to the Kuno landscape.

KUNO NATIONAL PARK: THE CHOSEN SITE

Kuno National Park (formally Kuno-Palpur National Park) is located in the **Sheopur district of Madhya Pradesh**. It was a **Wildlife Sanctuary from 1981** before being **declared a National Park in 2018**, covering approximately **748.76 sq km of core area** with a buffer zone of approximately **487 sq km**, bringing the total Kuno Wildlife Division area to approximately **1,235 sq km**.

Why Kuno was selected over other sites (Nauradehi, Gandhi Sagar, Mukundra):

- Dense prey base of chital (spotted deer), sambar, and nilgai
- Open mixed deciduous and grassland habitats resembling African savannah
- Relatively low human settlement density in the immediate core
- Pre-existing infrastructure from earlier preparations for Asiatic lion translocation (Kuno was originally designated to receive lions from Gir, but that project stalled)

Challenges at Kuno:

- Monsoon conditions are very different from southern African habitats
- Presence of leopards, which can compete with and occasionally kill cheetahs

Village settlements in and around the buffer zone create human-wildlife interaction points

The national park was initially considered too small; a cheetah needs 100–1,000 sq km of territory

Plans exist to eventually create a **cheetah landscape** extending across Kuno, Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary, and connecting forests — a total potential landscape of ~5,000–6,000 sq km that could sustain a population of 30–40 adults.

PROJECT CHEETAH: ADMINISTRATIVE AND SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORK

Nodal authority: NTCA (National Tiger Conservation Authority) — a statutory body formed in **December 2005** under the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972** (as amended in **2006**) — under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change

Administrative umbrella: Project Tiger — launched on **April 1, 1973** by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi; **Corbett National Park** (Uttarakhand) was designated the first Project Tiger reserve. Project Cheetah operates within the institutional infrastructure, ranger networks, and funding mechanisms that Project Tiger established.

International partners: Namibia's **Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF)** — founded in **1990 by Dr. Laurie Marker**; headquartered in **Otjiwarongo, Namibia** — was the key scientific partner for Batch 1. South Africa's national parks and Botswana's Department of Wildlife and National Parks provided subsequent batches.

Scientific framework: Based on the **Action Plan for Cheetah Introduction in India** prepared by the **WII (Wildlife Institute of India)** — established in **1982**, located in **Dehradun**, Uttarakhand. WII continues to provide scientific oversight for the programme.

Monitoring: Each cheetah is fitted with a VHF radio collar and some with GPS satellite collars; daily monitoring by dedicated tracking teams

THE GLOBAL CHEETAH CRISIS

The Botswana translocation also draws attention to the global cheetah conservation situation:

Metric	Data
Global wild cheetah population	~7,000–7,500 (some estimates lower)
Historical range loss	Over 90% of historic range lost
Countries with significant populations	Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Kenya
Fastest land animal speed	110–120 km/h (but can only sustain for ~20–30 seconds)
Breeding in captivity	Difficult; cheetahs are notoriously stress-sensitive
IUCN Status	Vulnerable (some regional populations: Critically Endangered)

The cheetah's primary threats are habitat fragmentation, prey loss, human-wildlife conflict (farmers kill cheetahs that prey on livestock), and illegal wildlife trade (cubs are captured for the exotic pet trade, particularly in the Middle East).

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Project Cheetah's long-term success will be measured by:

- A self-sustaining wild population of at least 35–40 breeding adults in India
- Cheetahs ranging freely beyond the boundaries of Kuno NP
- A functional predator-prey dynamic that ecologically benefits the grassland ecosystem
- Successful conflict mitigation with surrounding communities
- Economic benefits to local communities through wildlife tourism

The NTCA aims to expand cheetahs to additional sites — Gandhi Sagar, Nauradehi, and eventually Rajasthan's grasslands — creating a metapopulation with genetic exchange between sites.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Kuno NP — district (Sheopur), state (MP), core area; Project Cheetah launch date (Sept 2022); African vs. Asiatic cheetah; Botswana cheetah population share (24%); IUCN status; NTCA.

MAINS GS-3:

Biodiversity conservation; species reintroduction — challenges and ethics; Project Tiger institutional framework; human-wildlife conflict; international wildlife cooperation (India-Namibia, India-Botswana).

ESSAY:

"Conservation in the Anthropocene requires reimagining the boundaries between nature and human society."

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PROJECT CHEETAH — CORE DATA:

Project Cheetah launched: September 17, 2022 — PM Narendra Modi personally released the first 8 Namibian cheetahs at Kuno National Park

Nodal Authority: NTCA — National Tiger Conservation Authority; established 2005 under Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act, 2006

Administrative umbrella: Project Tiger framework; Project Tiger launched April 1, 1973 by PM Indira Gandhi; Corbett National Park was the first reserve

Site: Kuno National Park, Sheopur district, Madhya Pradesh

Kuno declared National Park: 2018 (was Wildlife Sanctuary from 1981)

Kuno core area: ~748.76 sq km; total Kuno Wildlife Division: ~1,235 sq km

Batch 1 (Namibia, Sep 2022): 8 cheetahs (5 female, 3 male)

Batch 2 (South Africa, Feb 2023): 12 cheetahs (7 female, 5 male)

Batch 3 (Botswana, 2026): 9 cheetahs

Indian-born cubs: 29 (as of March 2026)

Total population at Kuno: ~48

Botswana's cheetah population: ~1,700 = **24% of global cheetah population (~7,100)**

% of Botswana cheetahs on farmlands: 76.9%; monitored by Cheetah Conservation Botswana (CCB)

Last wild cheetah sighting in India: 1947 — Maharaja Ramanuj Pratap Singh Deo of Korea princely state (present-day Chhattisgarh) shot the last 3 cheetahs; officially declared extinct 1952

Asiatic cheetah (Acinonyx jubatus venaticus): Critically Endangered; ~12–17 survive only in Iran (Iran EPO, March 2025)

African cheetah (Acinonyx jubatus jubatus): Vulnerable; ~7,000–7,500 globally

Cheetah speed: 110–120 km/h (fastest land animal; sustainable for only ~20–30 seconds)

IUCN Status of cheetah: Vulnerable (overall); some regional populations: Critically Endangered

ABOUT KUNO NATIONAL PARK:

Also called **Kuno-Palpur National Park**

Originally prepared for **Asiatic Lion translocation** from Gir (Gir NP, Gujarat) — that project remains stalled

Prey base: chital (spotted deer), sambar, nilgai, chinkara, wild boar

Predators present: leopard (competitor/threat to cheetah)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF): Namibia-based NGO; founded 1990 by Dr. Laurie Marker; HQ: Otjiwarongo, Namibia; key scientific partner for India's programme

WII full form: Wildlife Institute of India; established 1982; located in Dehradun, Uttarakhand; prepared "Action Plan for Cheetah Introduction in India"

Global cheetah range loss: >90% of historic range has been lost

India's other big cat projects: Project Tiger (1973), Project Elephant (1992), Project Lion (ongoing), Project Dolphin (Gangetic)

Gir Forest NP: Only home of Asiatic Lions; Gujarat. Lion population: **891 (2025 census)** — up from 674 (2020 census); 32% increase

One-horned Rhinoceros: Kaziranga NP (Assam); another successful Indian conservation story

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD): International framework under which wildlife conservation cooperation is structured; India is a party

Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (2022): Target of protecting 30% of land and ocean by 2030 ("30x30 target") — India's cheetah reintroduction contributes to this

Cheetahs are notoriously **stress-sensitive in captivity** — difficult to breed; wild population management is preferred

Illegal wildlife trade: cheetah cubs are trafficked to Gulf countries as exotic pets — a major threat to wild populations

Sources: Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Wildlife Institute of India, Down to Earth, The Hindu, IUCN Red List

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