PROJECT CHEETAH - ENVIRONMENT

NEWS: *In a latest development, five adult cheetahs—comprising two female cheetahs and three 13-month-old cubs—were released into the wild at* ***Kuno National Park*** *(KNP), Madhya Pradesh. This is the* ***first time that cheetah cubs*** *have been released into the wild in India as part of the project.*

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

Project Cheetah: India's Ambitious Conservation Initiative

Overview

- **Project Cheetah** is a landmark wildlife conservation initiative by the Indian government aimed at **reintroducing cheetahs into India** after their extinction in the country over **70 years ago**.
- The cheetah population in India **vanished by the 1950s**, primarily due to **habitat loss, hunting, and human activities**.
- The project was launched with the goal of **restoring the cheetah population**, enhancing biodiversity, and promoting **grassland conservation efforts**.
- **Kuno National Park (KNP)** in **Madhya Pradesh** was chosen as the primary site for this ambitious reintroduction program due to its **suitable habitat and prey base**.

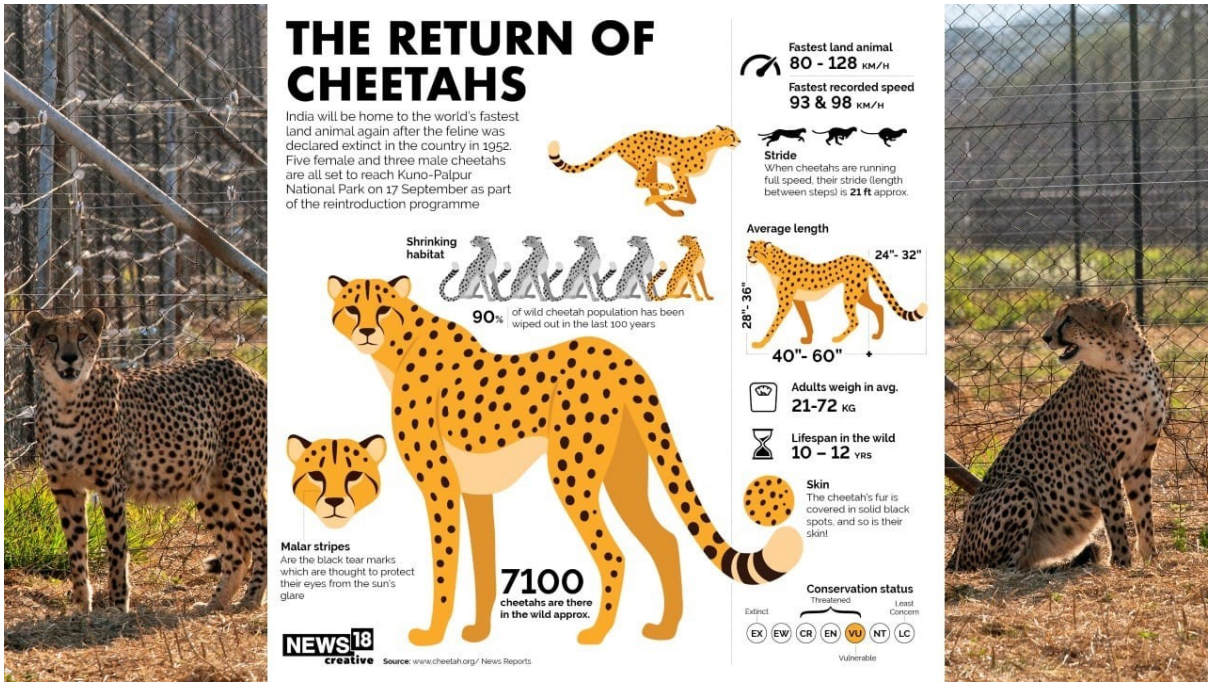
Progress of Project Cheetah

1. Initial Translocation Efforts

- **September 2022:** The first batch of **eight cheetahs** was translocated from **Namibia** to **Kuno National Park**, marking the official launch of **Project Cheetah** in India.
- **February 2023:** A second batch of **twelve cheetahs** was imported from **South Africa**, further strengthening India's conservation efforts.

2. Population Growth and Milestones

- **2024:** The first signs of **successful adaptation and breeding** emerged, with the **birth of two cheetah cubs** in the wild.
- **February 2025:** A significant milestone was reached when **five adult cheetahs, including cubs, were released into the wild** at Kuno National Park.
- As of **2025**, the total cheetah population at **Kuno National Park stands at 26**, comprising **12 adult cheetahs and 14 cubs**.



What Challenges Does Project Cheetah Face?

- **Integrity Challenges:**
  - Three Namibian cheetahs, Sasha (the project's first casualty), Jwala, and Savannah alias Nabha, were captive-raised as **"research subjects,"** compromising the integrity of the project.
- **Shift in Stance:**
  - India's decision to abstain from the **Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) vote against trade in elephant ivory** weeks after importing cheetahs raised ethical concerns about the project's commitments.
- **Paradigm Shift Ahead:**
  - Kuno's inability to support a **genetically self-sustaining population** necessitates a paradigm shift towards a **meta-population approach.**
    - A meta-population approach involves managing distinct populations of a species in fragmented habitats, acknowledging their interdependence for long-term viability and genetic diversity.
  - Unlike leopards, **cheetahs cannot travel long distances** between scattered populations on their own.
  - Borrowing from the South African model of periodic translocation for genetic viability is proposed, but concerns arise about the impact on forest connectivity for natural wildlife dispersal.

- **Kuno's Carrying Capacity:**
  - The Cheetah Action Plan estimated a high probability of long-term persistence with populations **exceeding 50 individuals.**
    - A feasibility report in 2010 estimated 347 sq km of Kuno could sustain 27 cheetahs, while the larger 3,000 sq km landscape could hold 70-100 animals.
    - Revised assessments in 2020 indicated Kuno's cheetal density at 38 per sq km, supporting 21 cheetahs, challenging the feasibility of a single population of 50 cheetahs.
- The project's only option now is a **meta-population scattered over central and western India,** posing challenges compared to the South African model of assisted dispersal.

What is the Cheetah Reintroduction Project?

- The Cheetah Reintroduction Project in India formally commenced on September 17, 2022, to restore **the population of cheetahs,** which were declared **extinct in the country in 1952.**

- The project involves the translocation of cheetahs from South Africa and Namibia to **Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh.**
- The project is implemented by the **National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)** in collaboration with the **Madhya Pradesh Forest Department**, **Wildlife Institute of India (WII),** and cheetah experts from Namibia and South Africa.

Fact Box: About the Cheetah

1. Biological and Evolutionary Background

- The **cheetah (Acinonyx jubatus)** is one of the **oldest big cat species**, with evolutionary traces dating back **more than five million years to the Miocene era**.
- It is widely recognized as the **fastest land mammal**, capable of reaching speeds of **up to 120 km/h** in short bursts, making it a highly specialized predator.

2. Conservation Status

- The cheetah is classified as **"Vulnerable"** on the **IUCN Red List of Threatened Species** due to **habitat destruction, poaching, and declining prey availability**.
- The **Asiatic cheetah**, once widespread across the Indian subcontinent, is now classified as **"Critically Endangered"** and is found only in **Iran**.
- India's last recorded **spotted cheetah** died in **Chhattisgarh in 1947**, and in **1952**, the species was officially declared **extinct** in the country.

Kuno National Park: The Cheetah's New Home

1. Location and Geographical Features

- **Kuno National Park (KNP)** is situated in the **Sheopur district of Madhya Pradesh** and spans a total area of **748.76 square kilometers**.
- The park is **bisected by the Kuno River**, a **major tributary of the Chambal River**, which flows across its entire length, providing a vital water source for the region's wildlife.

2. Existing Wildlife at Kuno

- Apart from the newly introduced **cheetahs**, the park is home to diverse species, including:
    - **Leopard** (*Panthera pardus*)
    - **Jackal** (*Canis aureus*)
    - **Chinkara (Indian gazelle)** (*Gazella bennettii*)

3. Potential for Expanding Big Cat Conservation

- Kuno National Park is one of the few wildlife reserves in India with the potential to **support all four of India's big cat species**, namely:
    - **Tiger** (*Panthera tigris*)
    - **Leopard** (*Panthera pardus*)
    - **Asiatic Lion** (*Panthera leo persica*)
    - **Cheetah** (*Acinonyx jubatus*)

With ongoing conservation efforts, Kuno has the potential to become a **multi-carnivore ecosystem**, significantly boosting India's global standing in **wildlife preservation and reintroduction programs**.

Source: https://www.downtoearth.org.in/wildlife-biodiversity/project-cheetah-in-kuno-national-park-not-environmentally-just-paper