University of Pretoria vets lead revival of India’s extinct cheetah

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Female and cub in Phinda

University of Pretoria (UP) academics are playing a lead role in driving the reintroduction of wild cheetahs into India as part of efforts to ensure the survival of the species.

With the global cheetah population in decline, the Project Cheetah initiative is part of a long-term plan to increase the numbers of free-ranging (wild) cheetahs. Despite significant efforts thus far, the global authority on the status of the natural world, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, estimates that there are fewer than 7 000 wild cheetahs in the world.

“There is growing concern about finding new export opportunities to ensure that the free-ranging cheetah population grows in a sustainable, manageable manner,” said veterinary wildlife specialist Professor Adrian Tordiffe of UP’s Faculty of Veterinary Science. “Very few new reserves can accommodate cheetahs in South Africa, and if no new space is found to accommodate the expanding population, animals will have to be placed on contraceptives to limit their numbers. This would be a tragedy, when there are protected areas within their historical range elsewhere in the world.”

This latest initiative, undertaken as a collaborative project between the Indian and South African governments, has been in progress since India embarked on a path of development that emphasises the environment. Historically, cheetahs were found across much of India and the subregion. Project Cheetah aims to bring back the only large mammal that recently became extinct in India, thus restoring balance within the ecosystems it once inhabited. It will be the first intercontinental species reintroduction of its kind. Cheetahs also play an important part as a keystone species in certain parks in India. Their presence could result in more focused ecosystem conservation, which could, in turn, benefit many other species in India.

Prof Tordiffe and Professor Leith Meyer, Director of the Centre for Veterinary Wildlife Studies at UP, have been working with the Wildlife Institute of India and the Indian Tiger Conservation Authority on

the relocation project since 2020, along with Vincent van der Merwe, who manages the cheetah metapopulation in South Africa and who sourced the 12 animals being prepared for their new home in the state of Madhya Pradesh.

Recently, cheetahs have been exported from South Africa to Mozambique and Malawi. The population in Malawi is doing well, and some may return to South Africa soon to ensure an exchange of genes. “We must make bold moves to secure this species into the future. Otherwise, in 50 years, there will be no more cheetahs other than those in captivity,” Prof Tordiffe said.

The mammal, which went extinct in India, is described as the Asiatic cheetah, which is a different subspecies to the Southern African cheetah. Only about 20 Asiatic cheetahs remain in Iran; this threatened population is too small to fragment. Other closely related cheetahs in northwest Africa are also critically endangered. The only sizeable growing populations of cheetahs worldwide are from small private and state-owned reserves within South Africa. While there might be small genetic differences between the Southern African cheetah and the Asiatic cheetah, their function within an ecosystem is likely to be identical.

One of the cheetahs going to India

Cheetahs are fairly adaptable to a range of environmental and climatic conditions. In Southern Africa, they have done well in reserves across the country, from the dry semi-desert in the western parts of the region to the wetter bushveld areas in the east. There is no reason to believe that they will not rapidly adapt to conditions in India.

“The cheetahs earmarked for the India reintroduction come from various small private reserves in South Africa,” Prof Tordiffe explained. “They are currently in large quarantine camps at two facilities in South Africa and are being prepared for relocation to the initial reintroduction site in Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh.”

He praised the “success story” of the Indian Tiger Conservation Authority in doubling the number of wild tigers in India over the past decade. “They have done a wonderful job in India over the past 10 years, and have the ecological and veterinary expertise to manage a new population of cheetahs. India offers a fascinating prospect for new homes for some of our cheetahs with its plan to bring the cheetah back to Asia.”

While the landscape is similar, with dry, open grassland and savannah, the key difference is that most of their protected reserves are unfenced.

“This is a deliberate policy that allows the free movement of wildlife,” Prof Tordiffe said. “They deal with human-wildlife conflict by compensating farmers for stock losses, and have a different culture, which discourages the killing of animals, making some aspects of conservation a little bit easier. The lack of fences certainly presents some challenges, but we believe these can be overcome.”

Outlining the way forward for the initial 12 animals, Prof Tordiffe said that once their quarantine ends and all logistics are finalised, the cheetahs will be flown to India.

“My role is to ensure that we get the cheetahs safely from South Africa to India, and to ensure effective disease management, preventing these animals from becoming infected or transmitting any diseases to carnivores in India,” he said.

He added that despite concerns from some quarters, disease risks are minimal to the animals and that these can be managed through quarantine and vaccination programmes.

“This is only the first batch,” Prof Tordiffe said. “We will probably be sending more, perhaps smaller numbers, but a roll-out would occur almost every year for the next five to 10 years until we help establish a stable population in India. The cheetahs will not be lost to South Africa for good. The Indian population will always be considered as being linked to the South African population because there will be an ongoing exchange of animals back and forth to ensure effective gene flow.”

The project will also create new opportunities for collaborative wildlife research between India and South Africa. “There is much we can learn from each other,” Prof Tordiffe said.

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