

INDIA'S INTEREST IN RE-INTRODUCING CHEETAH

The Deputy Minister for the Environment in the Government of India, Mr Digvijay Sinh, has asked for the advice of the Cat Specialist Group on a proposal to re-introduce the cheetah in India.

In 1948 three cheetah were shot at the same time by the Maharajah of Korea. They were the last definitely-known specimens in India. The main prey of the cheetah was the blackbuck Antilope cervicapra, which now survives only in a handful of reserves, totalling a few thousand animals. It has been argued in India that a project to re-introduce the cheetah could spearhead the rehabilitation of degraded areas.

It appears that cheetah survive in Iran - CSG member M.A. Rashid recently received an inventory report from the National Museum in Teheran, which did not specify numbers but declared that cheetah still existed in several reserves. However, the Minister says that it is "an uphill task" to procure cheetah from Iran, and he asks whether cheetah from southern Africa could be introduced in India.

The project was the subject of a draft recommendation at the CSG meeting in Kanha in April, as follows:

13. Reintroduction of Asiatic lion and cheetah

Recognising that reintroduction of endangered felids into former parts of their range may be essential to the long-term survival of taxa, such as the Asiatic lion and the Asiatic Cheetah,

that such reintroductions would stimulate public interest in the preservation of these species and in conservation in general,

that such an endeavour would result in effective conservation of the remnant habitats of these species, which have been severely degraded,

that the detailed investigation with regard to the status, distribution and ecology of the relict populations of these endangered taxa in their present habitat, which would be an essential precursor to any programme of re-introduction of such species, would lead to better conservation of these relict populations in their existing habitats,

Declaring that such re-introductions should only be carried in consonance with the IUCN position statement on Introductions, Reintroductions and Restocking,

the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group recommends:

that efforts be made to ascertain the possibilities of the reintroduction of species such as the Asiatic lion and the Asiatic Cheetah in former habitats from which they have disappeared.

The relevant portions of the IUCN policy on re-introductions reads as follows:

INTRODUCTIONS, RE-INTRODUCTIONS AND RE-STOCKING

PART II

THE RE-INTRODUCTION OF SPECIES

1. Re-introduction is the release of a species of animal or plant into an area in which it was indigenous before extermination by human activities or natural catastrophe. Re-introduction is a particularly useful tool for restoring a species to an original habitat where it has become extinct due to human persecution, over-collecting, over-harvesting or habitat deterioration, but where these factors can now be controlled.
2. Re-introductions should only take place where the original causes of extinction have been removed.
3. Re-introductions should only take place where the habitat requirements of the species are satisfied. There should be no re-introduction if a species became extinct because of habitat change which remains unremedied, or where significant habitat deterioration has occurred since the extinction.

The species should only be re-introduced if measures have been taken to reconstitute the habitat to a state suitable for the species.

4. The basic programme for re-introduction should consist of:
 - a feasibility study
 - a preparation phase
 - release or introduction phase
 - follow-up phase.

The Feasibility Study

- a) An ecological study should assess the previous relationship of the species to the habitat into which the re-introduction is to take place, and the extent that the habitat has changed since the local extinction of the species. If individuals to be re-introduced have been captive-bred or cultivated, changes in the species should also be taken into account and allowances made for new features liable to affect the ability of the animal or plant to re-adapt to its traditional habitat.
- b) The attitudes of local people must be taken into account especially if the re-introduction of a species that was persecuted, over-hunted or over collected is proposed. If the attitude of local people is unfavourable an education and interpretive programme emphasizing the benefits to them of the re-introduction, or other inducement, should be used to improve their attitude before re-introduction takes place.
- c) The animals or plants involved in the re-introduction must be of the closest available race or type to the original stock and preferably be the same race as that previously occurring in the area.

The Preparation and Release or Introductory Phases

The successful re-introduction of an animal or plant requires that the biological needs of the species be fulfilled in the area where the release is planned. This requires a detailed knowledge of both the needs of the animal or plant and the ecological dynamics of the area of re-introduction. For this reason the best available scientific advice should be taken at all stages of a species re-introduction. This need for clear analysis of a number of factors can be clearly seen with reference to introductions of ungulates such as ibex, antelope and deer where re-introduction involves understanding and applying the significance of factors such as the ideal age for re-introducing individuals, ideal sex ratio, season, specifying capture techniques and mode of transport to re-introduction site, freedom from disease and parasites, acclimatisation, helping animals to learn to forage in the wild, adjustment of the gut flora to deal with new forage, "imprinting" on the home range, prevention of wandering of individuals from the site or re-introduction, and on site breeding in enclosures before release to expand the released population and acclimatise the animals to the site. The re-introduction of other taxa of plants and animals can be expected to be similarly complex.

Follow-Up Phase

- a) Monitoring of released animals must be an integral part of any re-introduction programme. Where possible there should be long term research to determine the rate of adaptation and dispersal, the need for further releases and identification of the reasons for success or failure of the programme.
- b) The species impact on the habitat should be monitored and any action needed to improve conditions identified and taken.

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IUCN Responsibilities

- 12. International organisations, such as UNEP, Unesco and FAO, as well as states planning to introduce, re-introduce or restock taxa in their territories, should provide sufficient funds, so that IUCN as an international independent body, can do the work set out below and accept the accompanying responsibilities.
- 13 IUCN will encourage collection of information on all aspects of introductions, re-introductions and restocking, but especially on the case histories of re-introductions, on habitats especially vulnerable to invasion, and notable aggressive invasive species of plants and animals.

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