

Indian government approves cheetah reintroduction roadmap preparation

India's Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) has given a go-ahead to draft a detailed roadmap for the Cheetah Reintroduction Project, proposed by the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), and endorsed by wildlife experts during the consultative meeting held in Gajner, Rajasthan, last month.

Jairam Ramesh, Union Minister of State for Environment and Forests, conveyed the Ministry's decision yesterday in a letter addressed to Dr M K Ranjitsinh, Chairman, WTI, who heads the project.

The Minister approved the recommendation for a detailed survey of potential reintroduction sites in four states, shortlisted during the Gajner consultative meeting. The survey will ascertain which of these sites are most suitable for this endeavour as well as what needs to be done in each of them in preparation for the return of the cheetah.

The survey that will form the basis for the roadmap will be carried out by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun, in collaboration with the WTI, the Bombay Natural

History Society (BNHS) and the state governments concerned.

"We have been given a mandate to prepare this roadmap in four months. The return of the cheetah would make India the only country in the world to host six of the world's eight large cats and the only one to have all the large cats of Asia. The effort would also ensure conservation action in cheetah habitats in India, which so far, has been severely lacking," said Dr Ranjitsinh.

The Ministry's decision comes on the heels of the recommendations made by Indian and international wildlife experts at Gajner.

During the meeting Dr Yadvendradev Jhala, WII, had asserted that habitats are still available in India to reintroduce the cheetah

- the only large mammal species believed to have gone extinct from the Indian peninsula in modern history. Seven of the most promising sites in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh were shortlisted for extensive analyses to examine their suitability for cheetah reintroduction.

The experts had favoured cheetah from Africa for the proposed reintroduction as against the Iranian cheetah. International experts including Dr Laurie Marker, credited for development of cheetah conservation programmes in a number of countries, including Iran, had argued that the Asian cheetah population in Iran is abysmally low to spare individuals for reintroduction in India. This view was also supported by Dr Urs Breitenmoser, Chairman, Cat Specialist Group of the IUCN.

Dr Stephen O'Brien, Chief of the Laboratory of Genomic Diversity at the National Cancer Institute (NCI), USA, had clarified that there is no significant genetic difference between the African and the Iranian cheetah.

Wildlife Trust of India, 7 October 2009