

# Asiatic Cheetah

## Cloning Proposed in India

**A**n Indian team of cellular and molecular biologists hopes to clone an Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) in the next five years. The subspecies is extinct in India and survives only in Iran and, possibly, Pakistan.

The Indian government has sanctioned Rupees 50 million (about US\$1,000,000) for a Laboratory for the Conservation of Endangered Species (LACONES) in Hyderabad, capital of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, where the attempt will be made. It is hoped the laboratory will be ready by the end of 2001.

The cheetah was once numerous in India, and the 17<sup>th</sup> century Moghul Emperor, Akbar, was said by his son, Jahangir, to have owned 10,000 cheetahs in his lifetime. Cheetahs were trained to hunt blackbuck (*Antelope cervicapra*) for Indian princes. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cheetah was already rare, and, in 1947, the Maharajah of Korea, a state now incorporated into Madhya Pradesh, shot three with two bullets when he spotted them in his car headlights – the last physical record of the cheetah in India. Subsequent reports of sightings were usually attributed to leopards, known as “chitah-bagh”, meaning “spotted tiger” in Hindi.

Recent reports suggest that no more than 60 Asiatic cheetahs survive in Iran, with, possibly, a few in the neighbouring Baluchistan province of Pakistan.

According to a report on the Times of India (23 Oct. 2000), Lalji Singh, of the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), and his team hope to take the genetic material from live cheetah cells which would then be infused into the eggs of a leopard, whose hereditary material would already have been stripped. This cocktail embryo would then be inserted into the womb of a leopard and left to nature.

Lalji Singh hopes to persuade the Indian government to ask Iran for an Asiatic cheetah. However, only a single Asiatic cheetah is in captivity – in Tehran – and the small wild population is widely scattered around the great salt desert of Dasht-i-Kavir, where it is seldom seen.