

Iran Refuses Indian Request for Cheetahs to Clone

India's ambitious plan to clone the Asiatic cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*, which has not been physically recorded in India since 1947, and survives only in a small number in Iran, has been dashed. Iran has turned down a request to send two cheetahs – a male and a female – to India for research and has also refused to allow a team of scientists from Hyderabad-based Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB) to travel to Iran to collect sperm and tissue samples.

The CCMB has been trying for over six years to get some cheetah tissues from Iran for cloning. Iran believes it has no more than 60 wild cheetahs, and the only captive died two years ago.

CCMB director Lalji Singh and his team wanted to take the genes from live cheetah cells and place them in leopard surrogates.

Singh, who was the first scientist in India to use DNA fingerprinting to solve criminal cases, said, "Iran and India were to work jointly on conservation of cheetahs in Iran and cloning of cheetahs in India. A team comprising members from the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Zoo Authority of India, Wildlife Institute of India and the CCMB were to visit Iran. I had per-

sonally made this request to the then Iranian president, Mohammad Khatami, when he visited CCMB in 2003."

"However, the Iranian government just recently informed us that they will not loan India two cheetahs nor allow us to travel to Iran for sample collection. The letter asked us to contact Africa, which is home to a lot more cheetahs (but different subspecies)."

CCMB, which has been working on this project for the past six years was also ready with a special laboratory near Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad. The laboratory, which cost Rs 12 crores (US\$ 2,760,000), was formally launched recently. It has facilities to develop test-tube baby methods, egg and sperm banks and cloning technology to preserve endangered species. Scientists in CCMB were also being trained in nucleus transfer, using the same technique on rats, mice and rabbits.

Laboratory to be used for tiger conservation

Announcing the plan for the laboratory at a Press Conference in May, the Minister for Science and Technology and Ocean Development, Kapil Sibal, said that it would be used for preserving the tiger. Doing so was actually

preserving the human species, he added. Two different methods would be adopted for preserving the genetic diversity of the tiger population in the country.

According to the minister, the laboratory will collect tiger scat (faeces) for DNA finger-printing, which, he said, would give an accurate picture of the number of tigers in a forest area. If it were found that there was lack of genetic diversity, sperm would be collected by electro-ejaculation. The sperm with maximum virility will be frozen and used to promote genetic diversity through artificial insemination.

"In this process we don't need cloning", Shri Sibal said. Forest Department workers will be trained to collect scats.

The Project will be run jointly by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the Department of Biotechnology. By the end of the year we shall have the complete picture of the tigers, Sibal said.

(Sources: Ministry of Science & Technology, 19 May 2005. Times of India Network 9 July 2005)