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Project Cheetah Expands to Gandhi Sagar as India's Cheetah Population Reaches 56 with Second-Generation Births

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Recent Developments:

- **Gandhi Sagar expansion:** On **20 September 2026**, a three-year-old female cheetah, **CCB-2**, brought from Botswana, was released into **Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary** in Madhya Pradesh after being relocated from Kuno National Park. This strengthens Gandhi Sagar as the **second major cheetah habitat** under Project Cheetah.
- **KGP12's four cubs:** In September 2026, **KGP12**, an India-born female cheetah and daughter of South African cheetah Gamini, gave birth to **four cubs at Kuno National Park**. This is significant because an India-born cheetah has now produced offspring, marking the emergence of a **second generation born in India**.
- **Population milestone:** The latest births reportedly raised India's cheetah population to **56**, including **36 cheetahs born in India**; 53 were at Kuno and 3 at Gandhi Sagar before the latest relocation.
- **Programme expansion:** The National Tiger Conservation Authority has identified **Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary** as a second reintroduction site and is pursuing a broader landscape approach rather than concentrating the entire population at Kuno.

Project Cheetah:

Genesis and Objectives:

- The initiative to restore cheetahs in India gained institutional momentum after discussions initiated in **2009**, followed by preparation of the **Action Plan for Introduction of Cheetah in India**.
- India's cheetah reintroduction programme formally began on **17 September 2022**, when the first batch of **8 cheetahs from Namibia** arrived at Kuno National Park.
- A second batch of **12 cheetahs from South Africa** arrived in February 2023, followed by **9 cheetahs from Botswana in February 2026**.
- The programme seeks to **re-establish a viable cheetah population**, restore the species' ecological role in Indian grassland and semi-arid ecosystems, and contribute to global cheetah conservation.
- The long-term approach has shifted from merely introducing individual animals towards establishing **multiple viable habitats, breeding populations and a connected metapopulation**.

Why Cheetah Reintroduction Matters:

- The cheetah was declared **extinct in India in 1952**, making it the only large carnivore species to have gone extinct in independent India.
- Cheetahs function as a **flagship species for grassland and semi-arid ecosystems**; conservation measures directed towards them can also protect prey species and other threatened grassland biodiversity.

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- Project Cheetah therefore combines **species recovery, habitat restoration, prey-base conservation and landscape-level ecological management.**

Kuno National Park: Primary Reintroduction Site:

Ecological Suitability:

- **Kuno National Park**, located in Madhya Pradesh, was selected as the first reintroduction site because of its suitable habitat, adequate prey base and comparatively low human disturbance.
- Kuno is particularly significant because substantial **village relocation** created a relatively large landscape with reduced human pressure.
- The wider Kuno landscape also has potential significance for conserving multiple large carnivores, including the **tiger, leopard, lion and cheetah**, subject to ecological suitability and management requirements.

From Reintroduction to Natural Reproduction:

- The programme's conservation benchmark is gradually shifting from **successful translocation and survival** towards mating, reproduction and survival of India-born cheetahs under natural conditions.
- The birth of four cubs to **KGP12**, itself born in India, demonstrates that animals introduced under the programme are entering subsequent generations.
- Such births are more important for long-term population establishment than simply increasing the number of translocated animals because they demonstrate **reproductive adaptation to Indian conditions.**

Why Gandhi Sagar Matters:

Location and Habitat:

- **Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary**, notified in **1974**, covers about **368 sq km** across Mandasaur and Neemuch districts of western Madhya Pradesh near the Rajasthan border.
- The **Chambal River** divides the sanctuary into two broad portions, while the Gandhi Sagar Dam is located within the sanctuary landscape.
- The habitat is a mosaic of **savanna, grasslands, dry deciduous forest and riverine evergreen patches**, providing ecological conditions suitable for cheetahs.

Prey Base and Carrying Capacity:

- The official Gandhi Sagar action plan identifies **chinkara as the most abundant wild prey**, along with nilgai, chital, wild pig, langur, peafowl and hare.
- Scientific assessment estimated that Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary itself could potentially sustain **up to 10 cheetahs** based on the existing prey base.
- The broader **Kuno–Gandhi Sagar landscape** has been assessed for developing a larger viable population through habitat restoration, prey management and scientific monitoring.
- **Carrying capacity** is therefore central to Project Cheetah because population expansion must remain consistent with available prey, water, habitat and space.

Second Cheetah Habitat:

- Gandhi Sagar became India's **second cheetah reintroduction site** after Kuno when two male cheetahs, **Pavak and Prabhash**, were relocated there in April 2025.
- The subsequent arrival of **CCB-2** strengthens the sex ratio and improves the prospects of establishing a breeding population at the site.

- Gandhi Sagar also provides an important **geographical buffer** against the risks associated with concentrating the entire population at one location.

Significance of Geographic Diversification:

Reducing Conservation Risk:

- Concentrating a reintroduced population at a single site increases vulnerability to **disease outbreaks, extreme weather events, ecological disturbances, prey fluctuations and localised mortality**.
- Multiple sites distribute these risks and provide greater resilience to the overall population.

Metapopulation Approach:

- Project Cheetah increasingly follows a **metapopulation model**, in which multiple populations occupy separate but potentially connected habitats and can be managed through planned movement of individuals.
- The objective is to develop **self-sustaining populations across suitable landscapes**, rather than create a single isolated population at Kuno.
- The NTCA has emphasised landscape-level management and expansion of Project Cheetah to additional sites, including Gandhi Sagar and the **Banni Grasslands of Gujarat**.

Genetic and Demographic Resilience:

- Planned translocations between suitable sites can support **genetic diversity and demographic stability**, provided that movement is based on scientific assessments.
- A balanced population containing sufficient breeding individuals is essential for avoiding excessive dependence on repeated imports.

Key Conservation Challenges:

Carrying Capacity and Prey Availability:

- Population growth must remain within the ecological limits of available habitat and prey.
- Overpopulation relative to prey availability can increase competition, dispersal pressure and human–wildlife conflict.

Mortality and Veterinary Management:

- Reintroduced animals face risks associated with **adaptation, disease, injuries, territorial conflict, dispersal and environmental stress**.
- Continuous veterinary surveillance and rapid response systems are therefore essential.

Habitat Connectivity:

- Long-term success requires movement between suitable habitats where ecologically and socially feasible.
- **Wildlife corridors and landscape connectivity** can reduce isolation and support natural dispersal and genetic exchange.

Human–Wildlife Interface:

- Cheetah conservation requires cooperation with communities surrounding protected areas.
- Compensation mechanisms, awareness programmes, livestock protection and community participation can reduce potential conflict and improve local support.

Way Forward:

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Science-Based Population Management:

- Continue systematic monitoring of **survival, health, reproduction, mortality, dispersal and territorial behaviour**.
- Use carrying-capacity assessments before expanding populations or introducing additional animals.

Landscape-Level Conservation:

- Develop an integrated **Kuno–Gandhi Sagar landscape management framework** covering habitat restoration, prey augmentation, corridors and inter-state coordination.
- Strengthen preparation of additional suitable sites such as **Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary** and the **Banni Grasslands**, subject to ecological and management assessments.

Genetic Management:

- Maintain genetic diversity through scientifically planned **translocations and international sourcing**, where required.
- Gradually prioritise reproduction and population growth within India so that long-term sustainability becomes less dependent on external supplementation.

Community-Centric Conservation:

- Involve local communities in habitat protection, ecotourism-linked livelihoods and conflict mitigation.
- Ensure that expansion of cheetah habitats does not create avoidable pressure on local communities or traditional land use.

Conclusion:

- Project Cheetah has evolved from a **species reintroduction exercise** into a broader programme of ecological restoration, population establishment and landscape-level conservation.
- The development of Gandhi Sagar as a second major habitat reduces dependence on Kuno and supports a **multi-site conservation strategy**.
- The birth of four cubs to India-born KGP12 demonstrates the emergence of **successive generations under the reintroduction programme**, strengthening the biological basis for a self-sustaining population.
- The ultimate measure of success will be the establishment of **genetically diverse, ecologically viable and self-sustaining wild populations** capable of surviving and reproducing with progressively reduced management intervention.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Prelims Keywords:

- **Project Cheetah:** Launched on **17 September 2022**.
- **First site:** Kuno National Park, Madhya Pradesh.
- **Second major site:** Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh.
- **Sources:** Namibia, South Africa and Botswana.
- **Species:** Cheetah, *Acinonyx jubatus*.
- **Extinction in India:** Declared extinct in **1952**.
- **Key ecological concepts:** **Carrying capacity, metapopulation, prey base, habitat connectivity, reintroduction and adaptive management.**

Mains Linkages:

- **GS-I:** Geography of ecosystems, grasslands, biodiversity and human–environment interaction.

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- **GS-III:** Biodiversity conservation, species reintroduction, wildlife management and environmental governance.
- **Essay:** Species reintroduction, ecological restoration and coexistence between development and conservation.
- **Environment:** Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, National Tiger Conservation Authority, protected areas, corridors and landscape-level conservation.