A Project Proposal

The Cheetah Project: Creating an interface for human-cheetah coexistence in Kuno National Park, India

(A) Background

India has embarked on an ambitious Cheetah Reintroduction Project in 2022. In September 2022, India’s Hon’ble Prime Minister released a total of eight cheetahs *Acinonyx jubatus*, sourced from Namibia, in Kuno National Park (KNP) in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. This first-of-its-kind inter-continental reintroduction of a large cat is indeed a matter of great pride for India. It has been almost four months and the cheetahs are doing fairly well and have begun hunting down wild prey inside a large enclosure created for their soft release in the wild. In February 2023, the cheetahs will be released in Kuno forest completely in the wild.

It is anticipated that this reintroduction of cheetahs will most probably pose new conservation challenges in the Kuno landscape, especially the dynamics of human-cheetah interface when the cheetahs will be set free to explore and establish themselves in the landscape. There is a high possibility that the cheetahs may venture around human habitations and villages along the periphery of KNP generally to explore newer areas or in search of prey such as goats or smaller cattle/calves. The resulting encounter of rural folks with an ‘unknown animal’ may create panic and could result in retribution. The villagers may even confuse the cheetahs with the native leopards and this will only increase the threat to cheetahs. It is, therefore, necessary for the long-term cheetah conservation that an effective monitoring of the human-cheetah interface is established. Cheetah conservation awareness among the local
communities and human-cheetah conflict mitigation measures will be critical for cheetahs’ survival and establishment in Kuno NP.

(B) Partnership between Madhya Pradesh Forest Department

The Corbett Foundation (TCF) has been working closely on community-based conservation programmes since 1994. TCF’s flagship programme namely Interim Relief Scheme provides immediate interim compensation to the livestock owners who have suffered livestock depredation by tigers and leopards. It has prevented retaliation of the local communities towards these large cats at both project locations. This is one of the most successful and the longest-running ‘tiger conservation programme’ being implemented by non-governmental organisations. TCF has been an active partner with Madhya Pradesh Forest Department in research, human-wildlife conflict mitigation, conservation awareness and community engagement since 2010. Given TCF’s track record of working successfully to mitigate human-wildlife conflict and community-based conservation interventions in six states of India, the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department (MPFD) invited TCF to work in Kuno landscape to address the issues of human-wildlife conflict and spread awareness about these fastest running land mammal of the world.

(C) TCF’s role in cheetah conservation in Kuno

TCF has accepted MPFD’s request and deployed a small team of three individuals who are working in the 50-odd villages around KNP to address the conservation challenges and to ensure the coexistence between the cheetahs and the local communities. MPFD has provided TCF with a working space at its premises in Kuno. The villagers around Kuno belong to Sahariya and Moghiya tribes that have been traditionally hunting wild animals for a living. This has manifested in poaching of wildlife and participation in the illegal wildlife trade. Lack of sufficient livelihood opportunities have led to this behaviour, which is matter of grave concern. TCF has a challenge to work with these villagers and influence them positively to adopt a lifestyle that is in harmony with the wildlife. Very soon, cheetah tourism will begin in Kuno and these villagers could be trained appropriately to be a part of the ‘wildlife tourism’ industry that would eventually be established in Kuno.

Photo 2: A grassland in Kuno National Park
(D) Project Objectives

1. To create awareness and sensitise the local villagers on cheetah and other wildlife in the villages around KNP
2. To assist MPFD in mitigating human-‐cheetah conflict by facilitating the on-‐the-‐spot compensation for the killing of livestock by cheetahs
3. To assist MPFD in monitoring and rescuing the cheetahs straying out of KNP
4. To share information with the park authorities of the threats to wildlife and habitat that may come to notice in and around KNP

(E) Project Activities

TCF undertakes to assist the KNP team in undertaking the following activities in the Kuno Landscape:

1. **Awareness**
   a. Regular community awareness programmes in villages along the periphery of KNP where cheetahs are likely to stray.
   b. Develop resource material to popularise cheetah and develop a sense of pride among the local villagers.
   c. Sensitise the villagers in protection of cheetah and other wildlife of KNP.
   d. Develop and nurture *cheetah mitra dal* in the villages to support the work done by MPFD
   e. Collect data on the presence of wildlife species through camera trap captures

2. **Human-‐cheetah conflict mitigation**
   a. Prepare a framework for paying on-‐the-‐spot compensation to the villagers whose livestock have been killed or injured in leopard and cheetah predation and attack
   b. Collect on-‐ground information to assess the genuineness of the livestock kills made by cheetah
   c. Assist the KNP team in monitoring the cheetahs straying out of the national park boundaries to prevent conflict situations.

(F) Work accomplished between Nov 2022 to Jan 2023

TCF deployed its team in Kuno with effect from November 01, 2022. In just three months of our work, we have managed to accomplish the following:

1. Establish good rapport with the local forest department team.
2. Establish good rapport with the villagers in 50-‐odd villages in the vicinity of KNP.
3. Facilitate reporting by villagers of the livestock kills made by leopards in Kuno for which they have started receiving compensation from MPFD. This ensures prevention of retaliatory measures being adopted by villagers to eliminate leopards.
4. Collection of vital information of wildlife species in Kuno, especially the scavengers that visit the leopard kills.
5. Facilitation among local youth in adopting alternative livelihoods to increase the family income.

However, this is just the beginning and will need enormous efforts to establish the cheetah in Kuno and ensure their harmonious coexistence with the local human population. TCF has taken this upon itself and explores funding support from link-minded organisations that will support its work in Kuno for a period of two years.

TCF requests Big Cat Rescue to provide support up to **USD 10,000** towards this project. This is a pioneering initiative being taken by TCF and will play a crucial role in re-establishing the cheetah population in India!

*Photo 3: A project banner prepared for spreading awareness in villages*
ANNEXURE

Photographs of TCF’s work in Kuno

Images from camera traps placed at leopard kill sites in Kuno NP
Images of village awareness programmes in Kuno NP