

WALK, DON'T RUN

Tigers, Gir lions first...

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OVERLY-AMBITIOUS, though not intrinsically undesirable, would appear to be moves to bring the cheetah back to the Indian wild by relocating some of its African cousins in the grasslands that were once their natural habitat. Tasked with formulating a project report, the Wildlife Institute of India and the Wildlife Trust of India are understood to have identified eight potential areas for relocation in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Gujarat ~ but, wait a minute, are these not the very same states where big cats are already in trouble? True the tigers and cheetahs (and lions in Gujarat) may not share precisely the same tract of forest or grassland, and restoring the wilderness to nature is the highest form of conservation; yet there can be no denying that the wilderness areas of all four states are threatened by increasing agricultural operations and a degree of urbanisation, an added complication being the rampant Naxal activity in the western zones of central India. How much land would there be for the cheetah project to take root, and would not the threat from poachers ~ accused of exterminating the tiger from prime reserves in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh ~ extend to the cheetahs too? Not that translocation of tigers from one area to another with very similar natural conditions has proved an automatic success: cheetahs might turn out to be more tricky to accommodate since there could have been subtle, little-noted changes in the areas from where they were hunted down some 60 years ago. It could well be argued that those perceived problems are mere pinpricks which can be sorted out, but who can wish away the reality that moves to rehabilitate another cat will further strain already limited resources and manpower? As things stand there are huge "gaps" in the effort to protect tigers and lions by clearing the core areas of sanctuaries of human dwellings and activity, conflicts between the interests of forest-dwellers and carnivores. Leopards too need attention, perhaps of a slightly different kind. The cheetah itself may not directly impact on the tiger/lion/leopard situation but bids to rehabilitate it would surely divert attention away from protection programmes that are far from effective. Can the tiger and its admirers afford any dilution of focus?