



PROJECT CHEETAH

WILDLIFE ANIMAL FORUM PROTECTION SOUTH AFRICA STATEMENT ON THE EXPORT OF CHEETAH (*Acinonyx jubatus jubatus*) FROM SOUTH AFRICA TO INDIA

The [Wildlife Animal Protection Forum of South Africa](#) (WAPFSA) is a national network of thirty South African organizations established in 2017. WAPFSA is explicitly designed as a vehicle to engage with governments on the issue of the conservation and protection of wild animals and the natural environment in which they live.

WAPFSA frequently places the issues related to the conservation and protection of wild animals and the natural environment firmly onto the political agenda, our arguments are based on robust science, ethical and compassionate conservation practises and harmonious co-existence within nature.

According to a recent [media article](#) published by the *Times of India*, South Africa is apparently waiting quarterly progress reports on Project Cheetah, which are supposed to be sent by India's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change as part of the MoU signed between the two countries. The project is stalled, according to an unnamed source, pending import permission from Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The seventy-eighth meeting of the [CITES Standing Committee](#) takes place in Geneva, Switzerland between the 3rd and 8th February 2025.

The Wildlife Animal Protection Forum of South Africa (WAPFSA) welcomes the opportunity to support an investigation into current Cheetah export project between South Africa and India.

Until such transparent, robust investigation is concluded and published for comment, a moratorium should be placed on the future exports of wild Cheetah from South Africa to India. In addition, WAPFSA would welcome the assurance that Cheetah are not currently being captured and housed in bomas in South Africa for the next stage of the project.

WELL FOUNDED AND WELL DOCUMENTED CONCERN ABOUT PROJECT CHEETAH

An urgent [communication](#) was addressed to Barbara Creecy, the Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) raising well-founded scientific concern about the proposed project to remove one hundred and twenty wild cheetah over a ten year period from South Africa and export them to India in February 2023.

“We refer to the proposed project to export cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) from South Africa to India, which was the [subject](#) of an [access to information request](#) by our client to your Department in November 2022.

WAPFSA member, the EMS Foundation, raised several serious concerns with the legitimacy of the project:

- 1.that contrary to the requirements of the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (NEM:BA) the decision is based on an outdated and unpublished non-detriment finding (NDF);
2. that the scientific information based on which the decision was made to agree to the project is not robust;
3. that there is evidence that the risks of the proposed project to the cheetah population do not justify proceeding with the project; and
4. that from an animal welfare perspective, the project will result in an unjustifiable number of animals lost due to the risks of immobilisation and transport and also due to conditions in the destination habitat in India.

THERE IS CONCERN ABOUT THE LACK OF ROBUST SCIENCE TO SUPPORT PROJECT CHEETAH

The members of WAPFSA remain concerned that the decision to commence with the project is based on limited information and an outdated and unpublished NDF.

Section 62 of NEM:BA requires that:

1. “The Minister must, by notice in the *Gazette*, publish any non-detriment findings made by the scientific authority on trade in specimens of listed threatened or protected species and species to which an international agreement regulating international trade applies, in accordance with the requirements of the international agreement regulating international trade that are binding on the Republic.
2. Before publishing, amending or repealing a notice in terms of subsection (1), the Minister must publish any non-detriment findings made by the scientific authority in the *Gazette*, inviting members of the public to submit to the scientific authority, within 30 days of publication in the *Gazette*, written scientific information relating to the non-detriment findings.”

For all intents and purposes, it appeared that the DFFE relied on an NDF that is out of date, was never subject to public comment and never finalised. As it stands, the only published NDF for cheetah dates back to 2015 which is hopelessly out of date.

WAPFSA members remain concerned that the scientific evidence that the project will not be detrimental to the survival of the species is not robust that there appeared to be no further scientific input into the NDF since the 2015 version save for the data of a single scientist (Vincent van der Merwe). WAPFSA expected that at the very least, all South Africans and other scientists working in the field would have been given an opportunity to comment.

WAPFSA noted that the 2015 NDF recommended a zero quota on the basis that the Scientific Authority was “unable to state with any confidence that the export of wild specimens *Acinonyx jubatus* from South Africa will not have detrimental impact on the wild population.”

[Furthermore](#), the decision to export the cheetahs is a decision by an organ of state contemplated in section 2 of the National Environmental Management Act, 107 of 1998. Such a decision requires that “a risk-averse and cautious approach is applied, which takes into account the limits of current knowledge about the consequences of decisions and actions.

Accordingly, there is no clear scientific evidence to support the view that the concerns raised in the 2015 NDF no longer apply. There is generally a lack of scientific data about cheetah populations and confidence in the data that has been gathered was indicated to be low in the NDF. A biodiversity management plan for cheetah has not been finalised and there seems to be no coherent policy for cheetah.

WAPFSA believed that there was evidence that the risks of the proposed project to the cheetah population do not justify proceeding with the project.

In addition, WAPFSA remains concerned that the 2020 NDF is evidence that cheetah are regarded as rare and are vulnerable because:

1. According to the IUCN red list cheetah populations are decreasing and the number of mature individuals globally is estimated at 6517 with populations extremely fragmented and estimated to be confined to 9% of their historical distributional range;
2. The combination of wide-ranging behaviour and low densities make the estimation of cheetah population size (and hence threat status) extremely challenging.
3. The challenges cheetah face are further exacerbated by the finding that the majority of known cheetah range (77%) and cheetah population (67%) are on unprotected lands making them particularly vulnerable to multiple threats, including increased pressures from habitat loss and fragmentation; widespread human-wildlife conflict; prey loss and trade and anthropogenic pressures.
4. Metapopulations are groups of spatially separated populations. In metapopulations with only a few local populations, there is a danger that all local populations will simultaneously go extinct;
5. The killing of cheetah as “damage-causing-animals” is not properly regulated or recorded and this can lead to underestimation of the threat to cheetah;
6. There is substantial evidence that wild cheetah are being “laundered” into captive facilities and that permits are being issued for capturing wild into captivity. This is completely unacceptable.

7. Research shows that the cheetah faces extreme challenges to its survival and that the large space requirements for cheetahs, coupled with the complex range of threats faced by the species in the wild, mean that it is likely to be much more vulnerable to extinction than was previously thought.
8. There is also no new data on illegal trade, killing or on free-ranging populations in the 2020 NDF but it is stated clearly in the NDF that it is known that there is the laundering of wild-caught cheetahs into captivity and free-roaming cheetahs into private reserves and that there is no control over this.

OFFICIAL REQUEST FOR UPDATED INFORMATION ON THE CHEETAH THAT WERE EXPORTED TO INDIA FROM SOUTH AFRICA

Of concern, three months after the first shipment of Cheetah were exported from South Africa to India, WAPFSA member the EMS Foundation reminded Ms Flora Mokgohloa, Deputy Director General, Biodiversity and Conservation for the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries that relevant documents including copies of the export permits in accordance with CITES Appendix I and the medical records of the first shipment of Cheetah exported from South Africa to India, had been formally [requested](#) via the Promotion of Access to Information Act, 2 of 2000.

The WAPFSA member received an [affidavit](#) signed on 10 March 2023, stating that “copies of all transport and export permits issued to date do not exist”.

In addition to a CITES permit, medical records are of extreme importance for the health and welfare of the cheetahs during transportation and upon arrival in the destination country.

According to the agreement upon which the export was based, the twelve cheetahs had to undergo a programme of health checks and vaccinations. A copy of a [Memorandum of Understanding](#), signed 17 January 2023, clarifies at point 3(b) that the South African Government was obliged to provide both exports and “the health check to facilitate the export of cheetahs to India”.

WAPFSA fails to understand how an affidavit could have been signed stating that medical records and export permits simply “do not exist”. All attempts to clarify this have been unsuccessful.

Must WAPFSA conclude from the Department’s response that the Cheetahs have been transported to India without the requisite documentation being in order before export and that they were therefore exported unlawfully?

THE PROJECT HAS RESULTED IN AN UNJUSTIFIABLE NUMBER OF CHEETAH FATALITIES AND INABILITY TO SUCCESSFULLY RELEASE THE CHEETAH

In November Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Dion George was [officially](#) asked if South Africa was intent on sending more Cheetah to India. He was also asked about high mortality rate and significant problems that have been experienced in the recent export of Cheetah to India. The question was raised about why the project and the attendant export concerns were not included in the Cheetah non-detrimental findings.

Minister George [responded](#) by stating: “the Cheetah mortality rate in India had not exceeded the expected mortality and the mortalities experienced thus far, were within the normal parameters for wild Cheetah reintroduction.”

A non-detrimental finding is about the impact of the export on the source population and not the suitability of the receiving country. Therefore, the NDF will not address the importing suitability but rather whether the export from South Africa is detrimental to the survival of the species in the wild in South Africa.”

Minister George, [confirmed](#) at the end of November 2024, that no additional Cheetah had been exported from South Africa to India. All application for exportation of additional Cheetah would be dealt with on a case by case basis and will also be informed by the periodic scientific assessments to be undertaken on the translocated Cheetah as well as the population viability analysis of Cheetahs in South Africa.

[Concerns](#) have, despite the Minister’s assurances, been raised by an international community of conservationists involved in the US\$11 million project, who say inexperience and mismanagement as well as the government’s politicization and the sidelining of expert opinion may have contributed to the Cheetah deaths.

In addition, concerns for the vulnerability of the wild Cheetah species in South Africa have been addressed, with conservationists fearing that there does not seem to have been robust scientific research or planning carried out in India to support this project.

According to numerous [media](#) reports, a total of twenty Cheetah were exported to India from Namibia and South Africa. Currently, to the best of our knowledge, there are twenty-four Cheetah still alive, including the twelve cubs born in captivity in India.

It is important to note that all twenty-four Cheetahs are still in bomas (enclosures) ranging in size from 50 to 150 hectares in size.

After two years, all attempts to release the Cheetah from the bomas have been unsuccessful. The Cheetah that have been released have either died or have had to be recaptured after wandering away from the Kuno National Park in the central state of Madhya Pradesh.

Signed on behalf of the following WAPFSA members:



Megan Carr
WAPFSA Administrator
Email: administrator@wapfsa.org

mobile: +27832511978

website: <http://wapfsa.org/>

Michele Pickover, Executive Director **EMS Foundation**

Dr Adam Cruise, **EMS Foundation**

Megan Carr, Founder **Rhinos in Africa**

Ross Harvey, Director of Research and Programmes at **Good Governance Africa**

Cormac Cullinan, Founder **Wild Law Institute**

Chad Cupido, Executive Officer **Beauty Without Cruelty**

Vishwas Satgar, Founder and Chair **Co-Operative and Policy Alternative Centre**

Charles Simane, Communications **Climate Justice Charter Movement**

Wynter Worsthorpe, Founder **Animal Talk Africa**

Stefania Falcon, Founder **Future for Wildlife**

Luana Pasanisi, Founder **Green Group Simonstown**

Guy Jennings, Consultant **Wild Africa Fund Southern Africa**

Linda Tucker, Founder and CEO **Global White Lion Protection Trust**

Vivien Law, Founder **Ancient Earth Farm**

Kirsten Youens, Chief Executive **AIIRise Attorneys for Climate & Environmental Justice**

Francesca deGasparis, Executive Director **South African Faith Communities Environmental Institute**

Sairusha Govindsamy, Youth Activist Network **African Climate Alliance**

Smaragda Louw, Founder/ Director **Ban Animal Trading**

Stephen Munro, Director **Centre for Animal Rehabilitation and Education**

Samantha Dewhirst **Centre for Animal Rehabilitation and Education**

Pete Oxford and Rene Bisch, Founders **Betty's Bay Baboon Action Group**

Cora Bailey, Founder **Community Led Animal Welfare**

Mphatheleni Makaulule, Director **Dzomo La Mupo**

Liezl Smith, Chairperson **Kogelberg Villages Environmental Trustees**

Jabu Myeni, Founder **Gifted for Good**

Les Mitchell, Director **Institute for Critical Animal Studies**

Janet Solomon, Founder **Ocean Not Oil**

Steve Smit, Co-Founder **Monkey Helpline**

Liz Cornwall and Catherine Nyquist, Co-Founders **Panthera Africa Big Cat Sanctuary**

Lex Abnett, Director **Southern African Fight for Rhinos**

Dave Du Toit, Founder **Vervet Monkey Foundation**

