

The Przewalski Horse Newsletter



JANUARY 2006

THE TAKHI IN HUSTAI NATIONAL PARK

At seven in the morning it is still crisp when we go up the mountain looking for Przewalski horses. It is summer and we went out of bed early. Early in the morning and late in the afternoon the harems will leave the mountain pastures for the low-lying grounds of the Bayangiin stream. Here they quench their thirst and graze upon the succulent grass that flourishes along the stream. We are in luck, for we spot three harems and some bachelor stallions. While his mares imperturbably go along, one of the harem leaders approaches with arched neck the oldest of the bachelor. The two rivals spin around each other, stamping their hoofs on the ground. After a few kicks and screams the bachelor is chased away and the harem stallion rejoins his mares. We are not the only ones that enjoy this breath-taking spectacle, because more than 6,000 people from abroad and again some hundreds of Mongolians already visited beautiful Hustai Nuruu this year. At present there are 170 freely roaming

Przewalski horses or in Mongolian takhi. This is a seven per cent increase as compared with December 31st 2004, a small growth compared to last year.

It was hard luck in 2005: only eleven of the 41 new-borns survived. Wolves killed 29% of them, some

foals were stillborn and others died after the weather had abruptly changed into a menacing ice cold with gales. During the foaling season the wild horse community is in turmoil: mares are in heat and the stallions are busy siring them and chasing away bachelors. At the moment some 35 bachelors stallions prowl around the fifteen harems. The mares tend to keep the foals away at a safe distance from the clashes between the stallions.

The condition of the takhi was still good towards the winter. Photo P. Wit



Just then they are exposing their offspring to an attack by wolves. Rangers and volunteers team follow the harems at night to scare the wolves. Wolves are afraid of people. They found out that the bachelors

The staff will continue these vigilance's during the foaling season as long as the population remains relatively small. They receive much help in this from a growing number of herdsman. The overall co-operation

*Rangers and volunteers team follow the harems
at night to scare the wolves.*

also caused much unrest at night. Two mares died still carrying a lifeless foetus. Stress might have been cause of the foals' death. When it winds up in a wrong position, the mare can not release it from the womb in time.

with the local herdsman community is strengthening, as is their involvement with the takhi.

Of the harem stallions that were born in captivity only three remain, Tamir, Bayanhangai and Tom; all the

others were born in the wild. The arrival of 1992, proud Patron, lost his mares to a younger stallion. He now solitary roams about in the Park. The at a much earlier stage dethroned Ares was the source of much upheaval this year. He had taken up a fancy towards the geldings that are used as riding-horses by the tourists. They normally graze on the fields around the tourist camp, but now Ares threw himself up as their leader, driving them off to a place where it was impossible to find or approach the riding horses when the tourists need them. ■

AN OLD TRADITION REVIVED: HERDSMEN'S THREATENED LIVESTOCK WATCHED OVER BY TRAINED SHEEPDOGS

It is not allowed to hunt wolves in Hustai National Park; these are regarded an important factor in the preservation of the natural ecosystem of this mountainous forest-steppe area.

However, herdsman living near the national park look upon them with great suspicion. According a survey carried out in Hustai about 50% up to 65% of the wolves' diet consists of domestic horses, sheep and goats. In the two-years-period 2003 and 2004 the herdsman suffered greater losses than they had in the three years between 1994 and 1997. Presumably the number of wolves is on the increase.

Conflicts with the often very poor herdsman are undesirable, so a solution had to be found.

Three Dutch biologists, Grietje Lenstra, Hans Hovens and René Henkens - all formerly active in Hustai - suggested to rescue an old

custom from oblivion. In former days the sheep and goats were protected against wolves by specially trained dogs, more specifically the typical 'gartz', the so-called four-eyed dog. An initial group of herdsman immediately showed great sympathy towards this idea. A project proposal was devised and presented. WNF-

Mongolian dogs have light coloured spots above the eyes, which gives the impression of having four eyes instead of two. Photo: R. Henkens



Netherlands was prepared to commit € 15,000 to the project.

Meanwhile the preparations are well underway. In an informative meeting with the herdsman a documentary about a similar Canadian project was shown. In any case the dog must not intimidate or rouse the sheep. He has to be of a friendly disposition and only when they are threatened he is allowed to act aggressively.

Together with the herdsman the leaders of the project went in search of suitable true-bred gartz. Apparently these were hard to find in the area around Hustai: most were mongrels, aggressive and thus unsuitable for breeding. In the end a foursome of bitches was bought and after paying a small allowance other people were ready to lend the project their own four male dogs. The purpose is to set up a variety of bloodlines.

Just outside Hustai National Park a small breeding centre was built. A staff employee takes care of the dogs. The pups are weaned after

seven weeks. Ten herdsman families showed themselves willing to raise the first pups. At first they are permanently, day and night, kept in a small kennel with a few friendly goats and sheep near the felt tent or

overall method does not differ much from the traditional one. Only the Mongolians tend to take their dog along with the herd at a much earlier stage. It was striking that in the selection phase so much underfed

In any case the dog must not intimidate or rouse the sheep.

ger. During this first receptive stage in life they must build upon strong bonds with the animals they will later on have to protect.

A Mr Chuluunbaatar, who has been involved in the training of Gartz for twenty years, instructs the herdsmen how to train the dogs. The

dogs were found. The trainer must check if the dogs are being well fed.

At Hustai the dogs get vaccinated to protect them against disease.

In how far the deployment of gartz can really reduce the damage done by wolves is uncertain. Yet, this pro-

The newly built breeding station.
Photo: R. Henkens



ject surely has resulted in much goodwill among the herdsman community near Hustai National Park. ■

SENSIBLE STEPPE MANAGEMENT: BEST FOR MAN AND ENVIRONMENT

The Mongolians sing in all keys of the beauty of their land. Many of these songs seem to be inspired by Hustai National Park, for here deer and wild horses graze upon the grassy mountain slopes on the ever rolling steppe. Almost no sound is to be heard, beside the high-pitched shrieks of the steppe marmots, some distant bird calls and the chirrups of locusts and cicadas.

In 2005 Hustai National Park was again chosen the most effectively protected park of Mongolia. Nowadays it rarely happens that unattended livestock goes astray inside the protected area. Poachers and clandestine hunters are effectively dealt with, which is important because the number of marals (Mongolian red deer) has decreased from 160,000 specimens ten years ago to a mere 5,000 today. Therefore, the 300 to 400 marals that are around in Hustai have become a key factor in the preservation of the entire species in the country.

The steppe marmot or tarbagan seems to await an equal fate; elsewhere in Mongolia they are poached and hunted for their succulent flesh and costly fell, but fortunately there are still some 20,000 of them in Hustai. Only here tourists and other visitors can enjoy these two and other interesting wildlife species in total freedom.

In this 380,000 ha large buffer zone area around the Park the 350 herdsman families, 150 of which are from elsewhere in Mongolia, put their stamp on the daily life in the steppe. Some 100 nomad families feed their livestock in the immediate vicinity of Hustai National Park. The Park's staff knows them all by name and meets them regularly. For their existence they still depend - like their forefathers - on the natural environment. They guide their animals all over the steppe in search of water and suitable winter or summer pastures.

Due to overgrazing and a want of co-ordination the grasslands around Hustai suffered much in quality and quantity. After the end of communism the herdsman communities were dismantled and livestock privatized. From then on each herdsman did what he liked, without taking in account the common interest. However, in the mean time they have learnt that this anarchy will certainly lead to the destruction of their sole source of income, the steppe.

The growing season for grass in Mongolia lasts from Mid May to Mid August, which is rather short. In the past few years the empty abandoned summer pastures had hardly chance to recover. Migrating herdsman families from other provinces, eager to sell their wool, skins, meat and dairy-products on the markets of Ulaanbaatar, began to settle on the winter grounds. The effects of overgrazing did not hold off. The local herdsman saw their livestock diminishing, fewer young were born, the animals' condition deteriorated rendering

them more susceptible to calamities. In the very bad winter of 2001 most families lost 50% if not 100% of their animals. In 1999 each family possessed an average of only 260 animals, instead of the 350 to 400, which is regarded the necessary minimum.

From this can be concluded that half of the herdsman community around Hustai is poor or even totally reduced to pauperism. Steadily there was a growing sense that something had to happen.

FRPH board member and former international project leader Piet Wit, the staff of Hustai National Park and the Buffer Zone Council, in which all groups that live around Hustai are represented, sat around the table to come up with a plan to help the local herdsmen helping to save the steppe. Spearheads of the project, that reconciles with customs and traditions of the people on the steppe, are the construction, implementation of sustainable pasture management and also the tapping of other sources of income. The project, which is already in its second year, is

The craft of felt making has now been revived. This woman proudly shows what she made for sale.
Photo: P. Wit



being subsidized by the Dutch Ministry of International Co-operation. The herdsmen as well as the local authorities are very enthusiastic and the overall progressive developments made the Netherlands decide to prolong their financial assistance with three years more. The final responsibility rests with the Hustai National Park Trust.

What has already been achieved? The herdsmen have joined themselves in so-called khot ails, traditional groups of four to six households that manage their collective livestock as one indivisible unit. Each khot ail has its own winter pasture, shelters in case of ice rains or severe

gales and stack of surplus hay. It is the intention that the different khot ails will meet on regular basis, co-ordinate the daily control of livestock and maintain the water pumps and sources in their region.

Some khot ails are already active, others are yet in the phase of formation. The active ones come with own initiatives to explore alternative sources of income and to get more out of the existing.

Each group has its own financial reserve to which every family contributes. The project staff helps them through advice, training and by giving low interest credit.

The new efficiency allows alternating members of the group to dispend from daily routine to explore new ideas. In this way old skills such as the making and processing of felt were revived. The souvenir shop of Hustai National Park sells beautiful tapestries and traditionally ornamented horse-cloths.

At present the number of livestock surpasses the capacity of the steppe in the buffer zone. This has consequences for Hustai. At its borders livestock pressure is intensifying, feeding the urge to find other means of income for the herdsmen and their families.

The buffer zone project actively furthers the development of tourist activity from which the local herdsman groups will directly profit. Tourists eager to get a taste of real steppe life, ready to get acquainted with herdsman traditions and customs, are offered the chance to join up with a typical herdsman family near Hustai National Park. The first

The project staff helps them through advice, training and by giving low interest credit.

results are promising.

Not only the new is being explored, valuable traditions are also being revived. For instance, the otor, which is the practice of seasonally farming out selective horses to experienced drovers, who lead them into grassier pastures in other regions; this in accordance with the authorities of those regions.

The situation at present causes its own contemporary problems. Pasture control by and for the local herdsmen only makes sense if they can fully monopolise the use of certain summer and winter pastures. It must be avoided that strangers from other provinces will misappropriate the winter pastures by means of payments to the municipal administration. It is most important that the locals learn to make problems negotiable, to solve them and to manage conflicts. The buffer zone project teaches them how. It is plain to assu-

me that such processes will need many years of intensive coaching before sustainable result is reached. The most positive about the new relations are the members of the well running khot ails. In the old days the families were ignorant of each other, now they engage themselves in thriving social interaction.

It is not only the herdsman population that profit by the project. Thanks to loans supplied through the Buffer Zone Credit Fund village women are able to set up small roadside cafts or 'guanz' and thus bringing some economical relief to these poor villages. All along the tarmac road north of the national park and south of the villages Argalant and Bayankhangai women are running these 'guanz'. Their children will be minded at a brick day care centre, which is currently under construction, leaving

Since they have been cooperating in herdsman groups, young herdsman have more confidence in their future



them with sufficient elbow-room to carry out their work. The kitchen garden course is also very popular among the villagers.

You perhaps may wonder what the connection of all this is with the preservation of Przewalski horse in Hustai National Park? Well, according to our experience the protection of Hustai National Park and thus the preservation of its Przewalski horses can only be fully implemented through the involvement and co-operation of local people. Their loyalty towards the Park will grow stronger if they also derive benefit from its activities. Here the herdsman are offered a helping hand in the development of a sound and sustainable use of the steppe and water sources. This is not only of vital importance for the nomads, but also contributes to the preservation of the steppe ecosystem and Hustai National Park. ■

THE PRZEWALSKI STALLIONS AT THE GOUDPLAAT

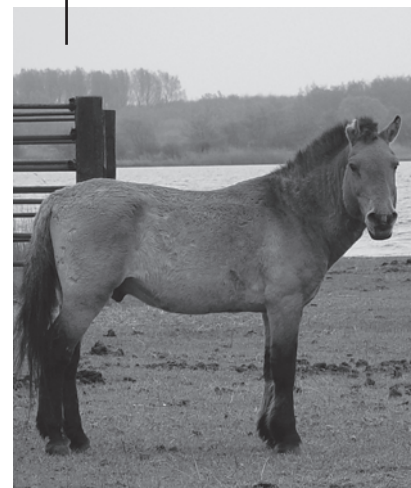
Already more than two years have gone by since the Day of the Contributor was held in Zeeland, in which a walk through the Goudplaat semireserve was included. Much has changed there in 2005. In December the Dutch Forestry Department (SBB), the owner of the area, invited the Foundation to discuss the future of the Goudplaat and the role of the Przewalski stallions in this. The thirty-six ha large nature reserve is steadily closing and the few stallions left are hardly able to stop the proceeding forestation. In the past few years the practice of frequent mowing was abandoned and also the number of stallions decreased. The Forestry intends to keep the Goudplaat open as a bird sanctuary.

The characteristic-grazing pattern of the horses provides varied terrain in which stubbly grazed areas alternate with brushes of tall grasses and bushes. Therefore, the SBB proposed to reduce the area of the Przewalski horses. To that end part of the Goudplaat had to be fenced in, leaving the remainder open for the general public and for the Galloways that also help keeping the area open. Last Spring the various proceedings were started. A high fence was put up around a 15 ha large area and a new watering-place was dug. Clearing has made the entire fenced-in terrain accessible for the horses. Large parties of bushes have disappeared. The bushes were twice cleared, thanks to which the new

grass is noticeably coming up. Yet there will be not enough grass for the horses to pass winter. Extra feeding is still necessary.

There are only five stallions left now. Last Spring seventeen-years-old

After the construction of the new fence was finished everything went soon back to normal at the Goudplaat.



Maran died. He suffered from chronic navicular disease and his walk became bad and worse. Apparently, he was in pain and after consulting

the vet it was decided to euthanise him. The remaining ones, Ireg, Almas, Usch, Amarkhan and Burchanbileg are facing winter in

good condition. They adapt themselves very well to their restructured habitat. ■

PRZEWALSKI'S IN THE PUSZTA

May 2005. While the whole continent seems to be soaking wet, we're on our way to Hungary. At last we will see the Przewalski horses of the Pentazug in the Hortobagy National Park. After a nice cup-o'-coffee at the local Csardas in Hortobagy village we get in the jeep. Biologist Viola has the knack of steering the vehicle over the wet and slippery steppe.

Waltraut Zimmermann from Cologne Zoo guides us. She begins to tell us in detail about the 2400 ha large area and the Przewalski horses that live here. Although the terrain is flat, the tall grass makes it difficult to find out where the Przewalski horses are. Then we spot the first Przewalski's. It is the stallion group, standing in the wind on a sandy hill, trying to avoid the menace that insects are. There are more than 50 Przewalski horse, divided over five harems and the bachelor group we are looking for. Three of the harem stallions were born in the Pentazug.

Leaving the bachelors the grunting jeep splutters through the slough towards the home range of Moros and his harem. Here Csilla had her first foal last April. The story of her life is a quite remarkable one. She lost her mother when she was yet two-and-a-half months old. Her father Makan took pity on the vulnerable half-orphan; he protected and cared for her. Through supplementary rations of oat she got a sufficient intake of proteins. Now she has grown into a healthy adult, and, considering her own bad start in life, she appears to carry her own motherhood with no difficulty whatsoever. Here in Pentazug most mares will be

served for the first time when they are still yearlings. At the age of two they will have their first foals. In this they are much younger than the wild-born Przewalski mares of Hustai National Park: only 19% and 67% will give birth at the ages of three and four.

Although completely treeless, apart from some stray shrubs, the puszta still manages to render the beholder with a variegated visual spectacle: the different species of grass build up

respecting considerable distances between them. As to that the harem stallions were the most alert during springtime. However, from 2004 onward the pattern started to change for the remaining seasons. Now the different groups began to mix, even in summer. The tolerance that exists between the harem stallions seems to be based on a mutual understanding of each other's strength. Above that, most of the bachelors are still young, so it is yet unlikely for them to form a threat to the harem leaders. When young mares disperse from the fatherly group, they will seek alliance

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In this way new groups will form.*

a rich mosaic of greens and browns. In order to maintain this heterogeneity Heck cows were introduced. They cover the whole area. The Przewalski groups spread themselves to a much lesser extend. During the first years following the start of the project in 1998 the initially released groups had their own home ranges, while

with a stallion from the bachelors. In this way new groups will form. As the bachelor group is growing in number and maturity there will be a chance of violent harem take-overs happening.

Nobody is allowed to enter the Pentazug area itself. To give the many people that visit the National Park an impression of the former wildlife, a special area will be reserved as wild park. Here on a wide stretch of grassland some Przewalski horses from zoos will be shown.

The Przewalski horse project is maintained by the staff of Hortobagy National Park in close collaboration with Cologne Zoo.

The Hungarian supervisor is Mr Sandor Istvan (Nature Society of Hortobagy, Czinege J.u, 4071 Hortobagy, Hungary). ■

Przewalski horses on the Hungarian steppe; a feast for the eye



NEWS

Visitors from Mongolia

In 2005 the Foundation was the host of a number of Hustai National Park staff members. In Spring, the head of biological research, Enkhkhuyag, was invited to the Netherlands and Germany. His visit was sponsored by the Foundation. In Cologne Zoo he got the opportunity to acquaint himself with SPARKS, a computer data base system, with which various aspects of Przewalski horse population dynamics can easily be analysed. The help he received from Dr Waltraut Zimmermann and Dr Lydia Kolter was of great value. In the Netherlands much work was done in preparation of the book on the reintroduction of the Przewalski horses and the development of Hustai National Park. This book, which is being written in close collaboration with the Mongolian staff, is due to be published in Spring 2006. Enkhkhuyag's visit was also a good opportunity to strengthen the relations with the universities of Utrecht and Wageningen. In the latter the current activities regarding the wolf research and in Utrecht the results of Marja van Staalduinen's completed Ph D study on the influence of small grazers on the vegetation of the mountain steppe area were discussed.

Mr Toghtoghsuren, who came to visit us in the autumn, leads the protection staff of the National Park. Therefore, he was especially interested in the working methods of various nature reserves in the Netherlands, for instance the Biesbosch. For Mr Toghtoghsuren and for Mt Enkhkhuyag it had been their first acquaintance with Europe and European culture. Knowledge about western culture and mentality will help them to better adjust to the expectations of the many international visitors and researchers

coming to Hustai National Park.

At the end of October the director of Hustai National Park, Prof. Dr. N. Bandi, and the Mongolian leader of the Buffer Zone Project, Mr Uuld, arrived. They also visited a variety of Dutch nature parks.

The continuity of the project was discussed with a variety of experts, politicians and the Board of the Foundation.

Ecovolunteers at work in Hustai National Park

In 2005 forty people from outside Mongolia voluntarily contributed to the research of the free-living Przewalski horses. These ecovolunteers find gratification in working for a good cause during their holidays. Of course, Hustai's staff is happy to receive these people: their collective field observations contribute to a greater understanding of Przewalski horse habitat use and distribution. Most ecovolunteers are equally pleased with their stay and the hospitality of the Mongolian people.

Nevertheless, difficulties are due to occur from time to time. The

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Mongolian mentality differs in many aspects much from what one is used to at home. People from the West appreciate tight working schemes: they will mind the - in their conception - local inefficiency or even miss such tight working scheme.

This summer Franziska Roth arrived in Hustai to train the Mongolian staff how to supervise the research activities of the ecovolunteers. The research program and the processing/analysing of the collected

data were held up to the light again. The biologist from Germany, whose expenses were paid for by the Foundation, will also write, at the Foundation's request, manuals for the research staff and for the ecovolunteers. This will help the ecovolunteers to get a better understanding of what is to be expected of them, get them involved in the research activities much quicker and also bring about more efficiency in the processing of the acquired field data.

Reintroducing Przewalski horses into the Kalameili Nature Reserve in China

Three years ago we informed you about a reintroduction project in the Kalameili reserve in Xinjiang. The Chinese initially released 27 Przewalski horses; it was a short-lived adventure. Some of the horses could not cope with the biting cold and the high layer of snow. It was impossible for the stallion to defend the whole of his overcrowding harem. A number of Przewalski horses chose to join up with the domestic livestock of the nomads. The Chinese managed to catch the remaining horses and to bring them over to the Jimsar breeding station near Urumchi. At present over 170 Przewalski horses are kept within the boundaries of the centre. These are the descendants of the in total 18 Przewalski horses that were imported from American and European zoos between 1985 and 1991.

The good news is that a second attempt to release Przewalski horses is in the making. Having learnt from their mistakes the Chinese are determined to do things right this time. To that end they did call in the help of Dr. Waltraut Zimmermann of Cologne Zoo. In October 2004 she visited Jimsar and the 1.7 million

NEWS

large Kalameili reserve some 200 kms further on. Since then there has been no delay. On September 6th 2005 four stallions were flown over to Urumchi from the European zoos; they bring new blood into the Jimsar population. Next year the USA

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will also contribute four stallions. In Kalameili a 4 km² terrain of proper conditions was found: good vegetation and less snowfall. Next year the Przewalski horses will be released here for acclimatisation. A deal was made with the nomads to stay away from this acclimatisation area. In collaboration with the participating American zoos a socio-economical survey will be carried out among the nomads in order to devise strategies for the sustainable prevention of hybridisation with

domestic horses and to control the risks of overgrazing. A biologist from Germany will coach the Chinese team.

In the mean time some Chinese visited Hustai National Park on recommendation of Dr Zimmermann. There the Jimsar staff got a good insight in the working method of the Przewalski reintroduction process.

In memory of Jochen Haucke

On October 30, 2005, Jochen Haucke (67), the caretaker of the Przewalski horse semireserve Sprakel (Meppen, Germany) passed away. He will most and for all be missed by the ones that stood closest to him, his family. At the Foundation, the news of his illness and decease came in as a shock. Jochen was a true horseman. When in 1988 the minister of agriculture of Lower Saxony, Ritz, agreed with the plan to transform one of the federal state's nature reserves into a semireserve for the Przewalski horses of the Foundation, he took the immediate opportunity to advocate the advantages of Sprakel to his superiors and conservationist'

Jochen repairs the electric fences for the acclimatisation areas at Hustai National Park



authorities. The first group could be released into the 67 ha area in 1991. Jochen turned out to be a conscientious caretaker. Together we went through many thrilling moments: the release, the integration of the group, the capture and transport to Nature Park Lelystad, the assembly point for the transport to Hustai National Park, Mongolia. The ultimate moment was in 2000 when he was able to accompany his Przewalski horses to Mongolia. We will remember him dearly. ■

An Appeal To Our Contributors!

As always we look happily forward to receive your donations. Donations, which help us to save the unique wild horses of Mongolia. However, some of the donations reach us in the form of cheques or bank transfers. This is rather unfortunate, because after deduction of the bank's transferal commissions only a tiny percentage of the remitted money will be left. This is not only pitiful for the Foundation - it barely covers the processing and sending costs of this newsletter -, but it is also a waste of your money. Money that you thought would come to the benefit of the Przewalski horses. Therefore, we kindly ask you to send us your donation cash by mail. In this way we will be able to use all of it for the cause of the takhi in Hustai National Park. At your request, we will send you a receipt.

Thank you in advance.

Colophon

"Przewalski-Horse" is a joint issue of the Foundation for the Preservation and Protection of the Przewalski Horse and the Foundation Reserves Przewalski Horse.
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