

Wild asses vulnerable

By Vinset Vijn

Once there were populations from the Red Sea to the Yellow River in China. Today there are fewer than 90,000, 80 percent of them in Mongolia.

The Asiatic wild ass, ancestor of the domestic donkey, has been in decline for the last fifty years, and only in Mongolia are there significant numbers.

Biologist and leader of a species specialist group, Patricia Moehle said, "One incident can wipe out whole herds."

The World Conservation Union (IUCN) classifies the species as vulnerable. Moehle said there is a need for conservation programmes to monitor and manage the population but knowledge about the species is still limited.

To share information and develop a conservation action plan, sixty biologists met for a conference at Hustai National Park August 11-13.

Moehle explained, "Most leading biologists specialising in the Asiatic wild ass are here, with only a few missing. I would have liked more from China to come, and unfortunately the top Iranian expert did not come."

Experts travelled to Mongolia from China, Russia, Israel, India, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, while many German and Mongolian researchers working here and Princeton University Professor Daniel Rubenstein also attended.

Hustai National Park is the home of the wild horse (the takhi or Przewalski's horse), re-introduced into the wild to avert extinction. The Mongolian wild ass (the kulan or Dziggetai) belongs to the same zoological family (equid) and biologists are keen to con-



Wild asses on the alert

Photo: Dr. Chris Walzer

serve the current wild population and avoid having to re-introduce it later.

The Kulan lives in south and south-west Mongolia and across in the neighbouring Chinese province of Xinjiang. They usually live in groups of 6-12 animals, with one male, several females and the young. In winter they come together in larger herds of up to 500. They are wary of humans and depart at up to 65kph when approached.

The subspecies is at risk because Mongolia's increasing livestock herd is dominating available pasture, which is also reducing as mining and roads grow.

Hunting these animals was banned in 1953, but they are still shot by poachers for their meat and hides,

while parts of the animal are believed medicinal.

The initiative for the conference came from the Gobi Kulan project team, who are studying the animal's habitat and behaviour, working towards a long term conservation and management plan.

Researcher Petra Kaczynsky said, "We thought there must be other people in the world struggling with the same problems, so we thought it would be a good idea to come together."

She said this was the first conference of its kind focused on the Asiatic wild ass, but there were common conservation problems with other regional species, so the issues discussed here would have a wider use.

Conference sponsors were the International Takhi Group research centre, Hustai national park, Germany's Martin Luther University Halle, the Mongolian Academy of Science and the National University, the Mongolian National Commission for the Conservation of Endangered Species and WWF Mongolia.

An interesting aspect to emerge was the need for cross-border cooperation. Before the conference, Mongolian biologists knew little about Chinese work, and there were misconceptions about what happens to the animals across the border.

One outcome was a Chinese-Mongolian agreement for biologists to exchange information, lobby their respective governments, and seek funding for collaborative projects.

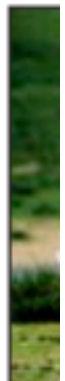


A mother guards her young

Photo: Dr. Chris Walzer

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