Since 1991 the MONGOL MESSENGER

500 T

No. 17 (1130) MONGOLIA'S FIRST ENGLISH WEEKLY PUBLISHED BY MONTSAME NEWS AGENCY Friday, April 26, 2013

Offspring of Takhi raised in Japan will return to Mongolia

Once believed to be extinct, Takhi horses now receive international support

Unique and beautiful Takhi horses under care and protection

B. Oyundelger,
The Mongol Messenger

At the initiative of Mongolia's President, the International Takhi Group (ITG) organized an activity to raise Takhi horses and give three young Takhi to Japan's Tama zoological park. In February 2013, the three Takhi horses were transported from Zurich, Switzerland to Tokyo. Special homes were built at Tama Park for the Takhi horses and Tokyo city administration funded this activity with a purpose to raise the Takhi horses and transfer their offspring back to their native country, Mongolia.

Tama zoological park is to organize an event for increasing the zoological animals with Mongolian Takhi horses and opening a new extension of the zoo on April 26-27. Professor Chris Walzer, ITG Director for research at the Research Institute of Wildlife Ecology of the University of Veterinary Medicine in Vienna, and and N. Enkhsaikhan, head of ITG Mongolia, are to participate in an event to introduce the history of reintroducing Takhi horses in Mongolia as well as results of the project.

In 1999, the International Takhi Group was founded in Switzerland and manages activities to implement the project, finance and coordinate activities of participants, and conducts activity for Mongolia through its office in Ulaanbaatar. The ITG composes zoo parks, researchers, funds and individuals from Germany, Switzerland, Austria, England, Czech Republic and the USA.

With a purpose to increase the head of Takhi horses, and improve the bloodline of the herd, the ITG has been cooperating with Takhi breeding centers and zoological parks of foreign countries and organized transportation of Takhi horses to Takhin Tal. Thanks to their efforts, the head of Takhi horses has increased to about 80 within two years.

The Takhi horse is an original Mongolian animal. In the 1800s, world researchers considered that Takhi horses had became extinct. In 1876, Russian researcher N.M. Przewalski discovered a wild 'Takhi' horse in Zuungarin Gobi near the Mongolia-China border, so the Takhi horse was named the Przewalski horse. The Takhi disappeared in the wild during the 1960s and researchers determined it was caused by climate, nature and human factors. About 100 years ago, Europeans took many Takhi foals from Zuungarin Gobi of Mongolia to be raised in zoological parks of European countries and Northern America which helped Takhi horses to survive.

Since five Takhi horses were first brought with support of the Christian Oswald Fund to Takhin Tal, Bugat Soum of Gobi-Altai Aimag in 1992, more Takhi horses have been transported to Mongolia. As of January 2009, Mongolia had had over 140 head of Takhi horses. But it declined to 49 due to the dzud disaster that occurred in the winter of 2009-2010. Some 32 percent of Takhi horses in Takhi Tal were brought from abroad while 68 percent are Takhi horses were born and raised in Zuungarin Gobi.

"Reintroducing Takhi horse is not for Takhi only, but an activity very important for the regional ecosystem. Within this project, integrated research projects dealing with the Asiatic wild ass, grey wolf, wild Bactrian camel, various rodent species and vegetation are being implemented," said N. Enkhsaikhan, head of the ITG Mongolia.

The color of the Przewalski's horse ranges from yellowish to reddish-brown with white nostrils. It features a compact body with a strong neck and heavy limbs. The shoulder height ranges from125 to 147 cm and it weighs between 240 and 300 kg. The Takhi's mane stands upright. From the mane to the tail there is a dark dorsal stripe. Unlike domestic horses, the Takhi's onset of the tail is prolonged downwards. The short hair in summer is replaced by longer hair with a very thick sub-wool in the winter.

In 1992 the first group of captive-born Takhi were selected from the breeding Center Askania, Nova in the Ukraine and then airlifted to Takhin Tal at the edge of the Great Gobi 'B' SPA.

The logistics of these first transports were very difficult and the horses' journey was long and exhausting. Five years later, in 1997, a harem group was released into the wild from the adaptation enclosures, and in 1999 the first foals were successfully raised in the wild. Until 2004, a total of 89 horses from various European zoos were brought to the Dzungarian Gobi. Since then, further Takhis arrived from China, Europe and another project in Mongolia.

Initially largely confined to the north-eastern corner of the protected area, range use of the reintroduced horse population increased. Przewalski's horses are very conservative in their range use and tend to stay in the vicinity of the release facilities. Therefore, a harem group was successfully trans-located to the Takhin Us water point about 120 km west of the original release site to speed up the expansion of the distribution range within the area. By 2009, the Takhin Tal population was entirely free-ranging and had grown to 137 animals. However, the winter of 2009/2010 inflicted severe losses. In 2012, the population was recorded at 75 animals.

Przewalski's horse groups are checked by park rangers once or twice a week. The rangers are able to recognize individual animals based on their appearance and between 2001 and 2008, an additional 15 Przewalski's horses were tracked by satellite telemetry.

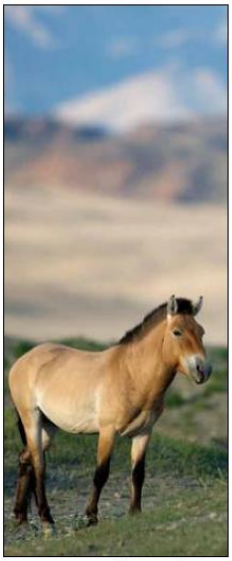
The 9,000 square km Great Gobi 'B' SPA was chosen as the re-introduction site. Established in 1975, it encompasses some 9,000 km² of desert steppes and semi-deserts. Plains in the east and rolling hills to the west dominate the landscape, with the mighty Altai Mountains flanking the park to the north. The Takhin Shar Nariin Mountain in the south forms the international border with China. Elevations range from 1,000 to 2,840 meters above sea level. The climate is continental, with long, cold winters and short, hot summers. The average annual temperature is a frigid 1° C and the average annual rainfall is a mere 96 mm. The snow cover lasts an average of 97 days. The defining factor for this landscape is that rain and snowfall are highly variable in space and time. Open water (rivers and springs) is unevenly distributed with almost no water in the central and western part of the SPA.

"For this re-introduction program to be successful in the long run, it has to be embedded in a broader context of ecosystem conservation. Horses as well as the far-ranging Asiatic (Mongolian) wild ass (Equus hemionus) were fitted with satellite-tracking collars in order to determine their position, home range and habitat preferences. At the onset, data collection was restricted to the eastern part of the SPA; but today, the spatial scale encompasses the entire Gobi region in Mongolia and northern Xingjian in China.

In order to strengthen cross-country co-operation in nature conservation, Przewalski horses were transported from China to Mongolia in 2012. The border strip between China and Mongolia in the Dzungarian Gobi is sparsely populated and could potentially connect the two Great Gobi 'A' & 'B' SPAs (together 53,000 km²) in Mongolia with the Kaamaili reserve (18,300 km²) in China, where there are presently initiatives to re-introduce Przewalski horses. If managed in concert, the area could potentially constitute a central Asian Trans-boundary Peace Park and thus be one of the largest continuous protected areas in the world," added N Enkhsaikhan.

In 1999, the ITG was established as a nongovernmental organization in Switzerland and Mongolia to continue and extend this project in accordance with the IUCN re-introduction guidelines.

Upon arriving in Mongolia for the first time, a young foal kicks up his heels



Home on the range

Takhi bond closely and do not stray far from their reintroduction area

Home on the range in Khustai National Park as winter draws to a close