

ITG INTERNATIONAL TAKHI GROUP

Association for the re-introduction and conservation of the Przewalski's horse (takhi) in Central Asia



Annual Report 2023

International Takhi Group ITG

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The President's Preface

The reporting year was characterised by positive developments that offer interesting prospects for overall development, such as the planned construction of a new park centre in Altai of Hovd and the application to establish a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The socio-economic projects are a core element of the positive development. These were finally able to gain real momentum in 2023, as international tourism is now generally on the rise again. For the first time, cashmere was harvested from goats from the local cooperative and sold without middlemen, and tourist trips to the region were organised. The achievements in the reporting period, both in the cashmere project and in tourism, strengthen our confidence that the desired goal of a successful coexistence of nomads, their livestock and wild animals and thus the long-term preservation of the steppe ecosystem is possible.

On the other hand, the weather conditions posed a major challenge. Despite intensive supplementary feeding during the harsh winter, the takhi population lost over a third of its numbers. It became very clear that climate change is bringing us ever closer to the ecological limits of the distribution range for wild horses and that this is creating strong selection pressure on the population.

The many activities sometimes place a heavy burden on the volunteer members of the Board of Directors and sometimes prevent them from tackling their strategic tasks. The Board has therefore decided to appoint Lena Michler as Managing Director and to outsource other administrative tasks.



The takhi in the UNESCO-Biosphere reserve of the Great Gobi in Mongolia

Takhi population: new challenges



The reintroduction of the takhi has been successful. However, the population is not yet secure, particularly due to climatic events and the influence of domestic animals. The winter of 2022/23 clearly demonstrated this. A very dry summer was followed by a winter with extreme temperatures of -40 degrees over several weeks and numerous snowstorms. In Mongolia, this weather phenomenon is called Dzud. Many wild and domestic animals in the Gobi fell victim to it. Despite supplementary feeding with hay, not all takhi survived. The population was reduced to around 260 animals.

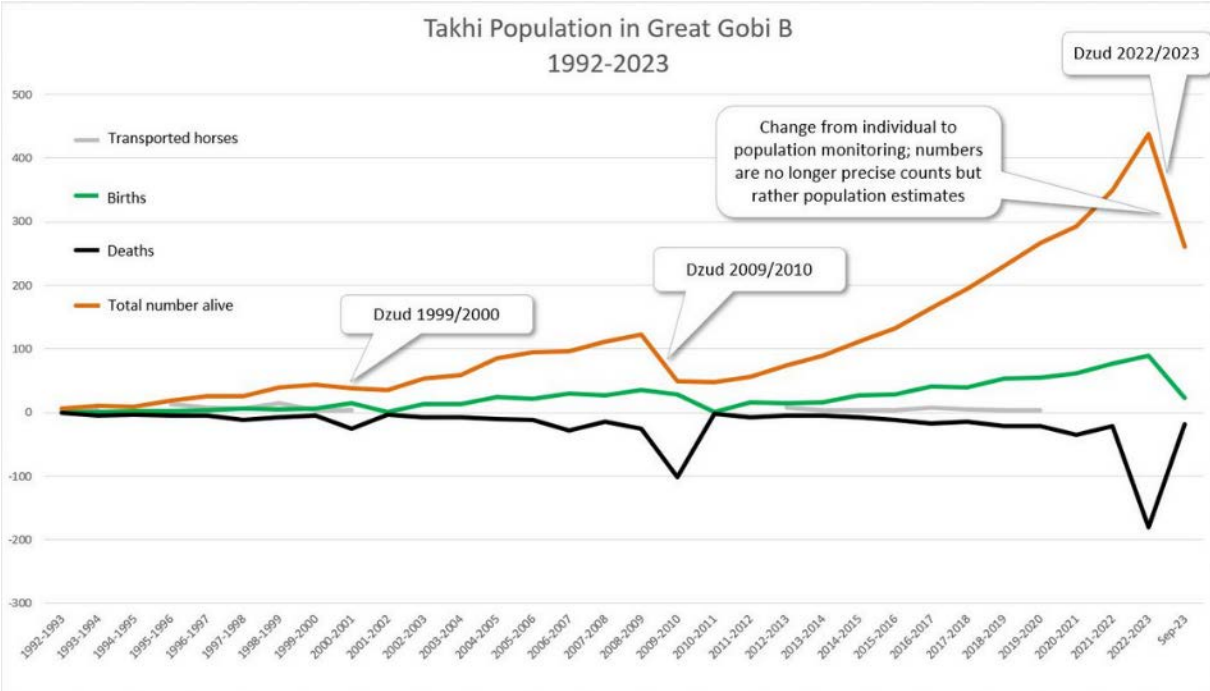
Does this threaten our reintroduction programme? Not according to previous experience. The population recovered within 6 years after the 2009/2010 Dzud. But today we have twice as many takhi after the Dzud as before. Nevertheless, another harsh winter could hit the takhi hard again. That is why we stocked up on hay in the autumn and also purchased a new four-wheel drive truck.

A partnership was also established with the University of Veterinary Medicine in Ulaanbaatar.



Development of the takhi population in the Great Gobi B SPA 1992-2023:

(Population within the biological "takhi year" from May until April)

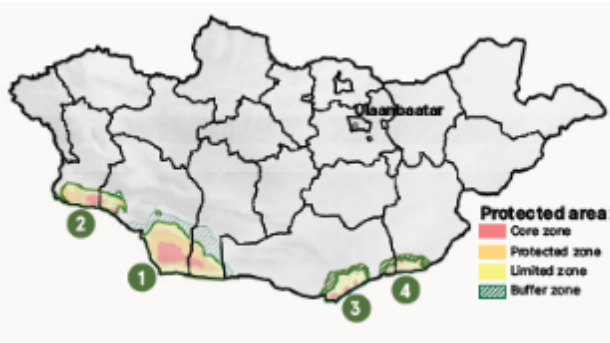


Births, deaths and total number of takhi in the Great Gobi B reserve. In contrast to the deaths (black curve) and births (green curve), the orange curve does not show the actual fluctuation of the total population, but the number of takhi as at 30 April (survivors after the winter). The previous peak of the population before the extreme winter (Dzud) 2022/2023 was approx. 400 individuals. Around 180 animals died in the Dzud, including foals.

Cooperation with politics and research

Application for the establishment of a UNESCO World Heritage Site

In the reporting period, great progress was made in submitting the application for the "Mongolian Gobi" to be recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Not only was the area enlarged - it now includes not only the Great Gobi's (Great Gobi A & Great Gobi B Protected Areas) but also the Small Gobi's (Small Gobi A & Small Gobi B Protected Areas) - but the funding for the application was also secured. In total, around 83,000 km² are to be placed under the umbrella of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which corresponds to twice the area of Switzerland.



Proposed components of the Tentative List:

1	Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area (SPA) Part A	4.600.000 ha
	Eej khairkhan Natural Monument	22.475 ha
2	Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area (SPA) Part B	1.800.000 ha
	Alag khairchen	36.700 ha
3	Small Gobi Strictly Protected Area (SPA) Part A	1.150.000 ha
4	Small Gobi Strictly Protected Area (SPA) Part B	680.000 ha

Biodiversity study on birdlife in the GGB protected area

The 2-year biodiversity study on avifauna in the GGB protected area began in the reporting year. The study is being carried out in collaboration with the Biological Institute of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences (MAS), the GGB administration and the ITG and is financially supported by several Swiss foundations. Some findings from the first interim report: a total of 126 different bird species were recorded, breeding birds and migrants; the occurrence of three internationally endangered bird species was documented with the pochard, the saker falcon and the European turtle dove; some regionally endangered species, such as the bearded vulture and the saxaul sparrow, were also observed in the protected area.

Socio-economy projects

The ecosystem of the Great Gobi B is not only the habitat of specific and sometimes endangered fauna and flora. Nomads have also used two north-south routes through the protected area for centuries. As a biosphere reserve, the Great Gobi B therefore aims to harmonise ecological conservation interests with the traditions of the local population. On the one hand, it is important to research the nomads' pasture use and to develop ecologically sustainable strategies on this basis. On the other hand, the nomads must recognise the indispensability of sustainable use and implement it. Tourism, which is intended to be another economic mainstay for the local population in the future, must also be based on these ecological principles.

This is where the ITG comes in with its socio-economics programme, which Lena Michler has been driving forward for around three years now. The programme focuses on two topics: cashmere as the most important source of income for nomads and ecotourism. The interim status of the ITG projects is as follows:

Cashmere

- The local herders' cooperative *Khovchiin Tsagaan Sort* was founded and already has 61 herders' families as members. Cooperation with the partner organisations "Sustainable Cashmere Union" in Mongolia and "Edelziege" in German-speaking countries was intensified.
- In May, almost 1 tonne of cashmere was combed and brought to Ulaanbaatar. After the washing process, 640 kg of pure cashmere of very good quality resulted, which was sold to 3 producers. A profit was made and this covered the expenses of the cooperative.
- Workshops to further improve cashmere quality and to train the herders of the cooperative on pasture management, cashmere sorting and management of the cooperative were held and will be continued as regular training courses.
- The first steps towards certification of the value chain (pasture management, animal welfare, socially responsible working practices within the cooperative) have been taken and potential partners/labels have been contacted.
- As the herders often live far apart, an all-terrain vehicle was purchased for the Mongolian ITG employees. An employee from the project completed an accounting course to make the complex accounting even more professional.

- The search for buyers in Europe who will pay a good price for the 2024 harvest is currently in full swing. However, there is also great interest in Mongolia for the wool and it is important not to neglect this market.



Combing the cashmere goats / Wool packed for transport to Ulaanbaatar / Workshop organised by the cooperative

Tourism

- In 2023, 5 trips were organised with a total of 22 tourists (excluding drivers and guides). The largest group was the "Learning Wild Course" with 8 people. The tourist groups spent 2-11 nights in the protected area and 1-4 nights with local herders.
- The feedback from the visitors was consistently positive. The experience gained is now being evaluated and improvements and adjustments will be incorporated into the programmes for 2024.
- The profits from the trips were distributed among the GGB, the herder families and ITG Mongolia according to an agreed formula.
- The ITG socio-economics team trained the herders in dealing with international tourists in a workshop and presented the travel destination at the International Travel Market in Ulaanbaatar in October.



Tourists in the ger of a shepherd family and at a picnic in the GGB nature reserve

New park administration centre in Altai of Hovd

Work on the realisation of the new park centre continued as planned, but took longer than originally anticipated due to the need for coordination with all parties involved.

An important topic in the reporting year was the future operation of the centre and the visitor section in particular. This is to become a meeting place for the local population. Franziska Peter developed initial conceptual ideas for the visitor section and the exhibition on behalf of the ITG.

The publics' information

Our website www.savethewildhorse.org, information brochures, Facebook & Instagram and the Takhi Post provide information about the activities of the ITG association in German, English, Mongolian and French. In addition, ITG board members, PhD student and project manager for the socio-economics project, Lena Michler, former board member Mirjam Würsch and the director of the ITG office in Ulaanbaatar regularly answer questions from journalists from newspapers, magazines, radio and television as well as in lectures.

The first issue of Takhi-Post in spring 2023 focussed on the topic 'One steppe, one health'. The second issue at the end of the year focussed on the new challenge posed by the high losses in the takhi population in the winter of 2022/2023.



The association ITG

At the end of 2023, the ITG Association consists of five organisations (Zurich Langenberg Wilderness Park; Bruderhaus Winterthur Wildlife Park; Prague Zoo; Nuremberg Zoo, Berlin Zoo) and ten natural persons, who also form the Board of Directors (Reinhard Schnidrig, President; Christian Stauffer, Vice President; Rebekka Blumer, Treasurer; Ruth Baumgartner, Actuary; Sven Hoffmann, Legal Advisor; Anita Fahrni, Assessor; Miroslav Bobek, representative of Prague Zoo; Jaroslav Simek, representative of Prague Zoo; Karin Hindenlang, representative of Zurich Wilderness Park. Lundeg Purevsuren stepped down as representative of the Mongolian government, as he is no longer Mongolia's ambassador to Switzerland. The ITG Honorary President, Thomas Pfisterer, is invited to all Board meetings as a guest. In addition to her dissertation, Lena Michler heads the socio-economics project on a 50% workload, interrupted since August by her maternity leave.

The ITG office in Ulaanbaatar is headed by Batsukh Jamiyandorj. Batsukh is supported in administrative tasks by Dugarjav Munkhjargal and Ankhzaya Nasantogtokh as a research assistant. In Takhin tal, Buyantogtokh Dorjbat works as project coordinator and Altantsetseg Erdenebayar as project assistant for the socio-economic project.

The ITG is financially supported by the "Friends of the Wild Horse" association. A loyal group of around 250 members and supporters have made the ITG's constant work possible with their donations for more than 20 years. All board members of the ITG and the Friends Association work on a voluntary basis.

At the end of January, the ITG once again organised the ITG workshop, which has already become a fixed event on the annual agenda. The workshop took place in the Zurich Langenberg Wilderness Park and was very well attended by participants from Mongolia and partner organisations. The main concrete results were the implementation of the zoning of the extended Great Gobi B SPA, the realisation of the management plan and joint considerations on capacity building.



- During a workshop, four meetings and various working group meetings, the Board dealt in 20203 with the following topics, among others
- Cooperation with the political authorities and the responsible institutions of the state and the aimags in Mongolia;
- Establishment of a European project management;
- Discharge of the treasurer;
- Development of a new management plan 2024-2034 for the Gobi B SPA;
- Monitoring of the free-ranging takhi population in the Gobi;
- Implementation of the National Takhi Programme in Mongolia;
- Research priorities and research support, especially in the areas of health, bird monitoring and gazelles;
- Socio-economic projects with the nomads in the vicinity of the protected area
 - with the development of the supply chain for sustainable cashmere;
 - with the realisation of pilot trips:
 - Photo trip to snow leopards;
 - Observation course on the behaviour of wild and domesticated equids;
 - Individual trip to wild horses and nomads;
- Co-operation with other takhi reintroduction projects in Mongolia;
- Planning work for the construction of the new park centre in Altai/Khovd;
- Finalisation of the zoning of the extended protected area;
- Developing the know-how and capacities of protected area staff, including the establishment of a student exchange programme with local universities;
- Information campaign among the population and at schools on the enlarged protected area and on species and nature conservation in general: continuation of the "Young Researchers / We are rangers!" programme;
- Further development of the ITG office and its activities in Ulaanbaatar.



Finances

Contributions from members, donations and support from foundations generated income of CHF 244,955 in the reporting year. We owe substantial contributions to the Jean-Pierre and Sonja Siegfried Foundation, the Boguth-Jonak Foundation and a foundation in Zurich. The Friends of the Wild Horse Association also once again made a substantial contribution. We also received a substantial contribution from various European zoos and animal parks through the "Horsepower for Wild Horses" initiative for the purchase of new vehicles.

Funds were invested in the management of the protected area, the monitoring of the takhi, research, the socio-economic project "Co-existence of wild animals and nomads" and the further development of the infrastructure. The ITG association closed the year with a profit of CHF 30,664. As at 31 December 2023, the association's assets amounted to CHF 163,206, of which cash and cash equivalents totalled CHF 103,105.

The annual accounts can be viewed here: <https://savethewildhorse.org/en/medias/>

Reinhard Schnidrig, President

