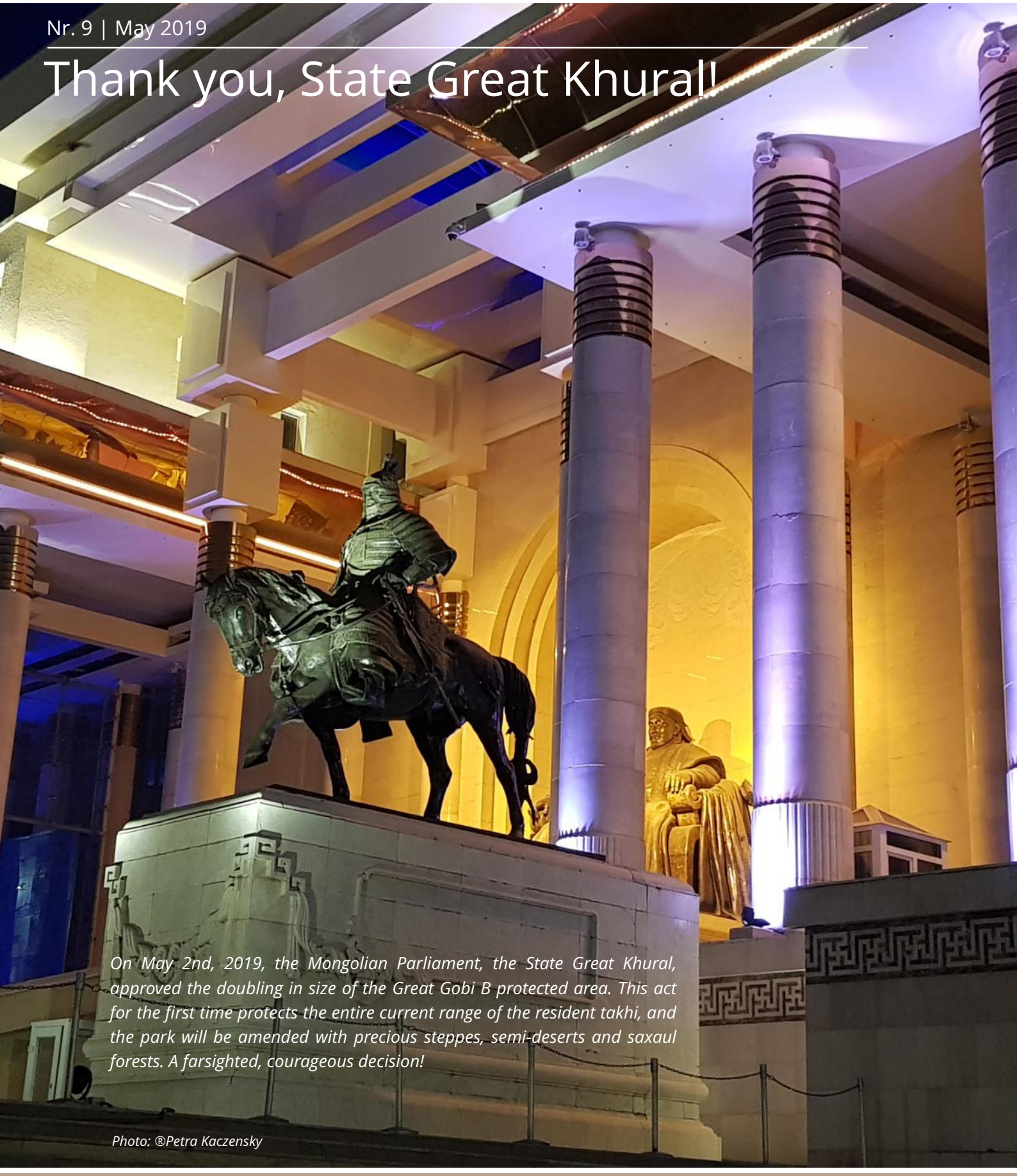
Takhi-Post

ITG INTERNATIONAL TAKHI-GROUP

Nr. 9 | May 2019

Thank you, State Great Khural!



On May 2nd, 2019, the Mongolian Parliament, the State Great Khural, approved the doubling in size of the Great Gobi B protected area. This act for the first time protects the entire current range of the resident takhi, and the park will be amended with precious steppes, semi-deserts and saxaul forests. A farsighted, courageous decision!

Photo: ®Petra Kaczensky

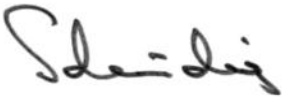
Protect the primordial Wild Horse and its habitat.

Dear friends of the WIld Horse

You as nature lovers know all too well how many terrestrial and marine ecosystems are under pressure from the steadily increasing number of humans and their likewise ever-increasing needs. World-wide, biodiversity is shrinking at an alarming speed due to the loss of suitable habitat resulting from human activities, disturbance and overuse; in many places also due to pollution and invasive species introduced by humans. That's why the creation or enlargement of protected areas is always a highlight for nature lovers. Both were made possible by the State Great Khural on May 2nd this year. What a delight for both our entire ITG team and our partners in the Mongolian nature conservation authority that the Great Gobi B Strictly Protected Area was doubled in size! In the east and west large additional areas were put under protection. With this the park for the first time comprises the entire current range of the primordial Wild Horse (takhi), and it is amended with precious habitats – steppes, semi-deserts, saxaul forests and mountain pastures. Moreover, almost two dozen additional protected areas were proclaimed all over Mongolia. A huge gain for nature conservation!

If you read the Takhi Post regularly, you know how dear this decision is to our heart. Many years of work, many discussions and a long hope were now rewarded. That should not be taken for granted. True, the vast expanses of Mongolia may leave more space for such generous solutions than, for instance, the densely populated countries of Europe. But here, too, they affect the local residents, and here, too, nature conservation directly competes with economic interests, from cashmere goat herding to mining. However, it also offers new opportunities for the local communities, for instance through development of a gentle tourism. For untouched nature is an asset, too – both ideational and economic. The State Great Khural's decision is pathbreaking for other decision-makers all over the world who need to balance the conservation of intact ecosystems of supra-national importance versus other uses. It may have facilitated this courageous decision that the Great Gobi B is a biosphere reserve by concept, in which nature and local residents are meant to develop side by side.

In the name of ITG I thank and congratulate the State Great Khural for its vision. It has spoken; now there is a lot to do to implement this mission. It will take additional marks, maps, rangers, patrol vehicles, monitoring, research and management work. Inevitably, those additional tasks will also cost more. So we roll our sleeves back to tackle this great opportunity for effectively protecting an as yet unscathed ecosystem. Will you join in?



Dr. Reinhard Schnidrig, President ITG

Photo: Rebekka Blumer

"Nature conservation also offers new opportunities for the local communities, for instance through development of a gentle tourism."

Faces of conservation:

Oyunsaikhan Ganbaatar, M. Sc.

Oyunsaikhan Ganbaatar is a graduated wildlife biologist, the long-term director of Great Gobi B SPA, and possibly the world's most knowledgeable expert on the population dynamics and social behavior of free-roaming primordial wild horses. Moreover, Mr. Ganbaatar is a key driver of the enlargement of his nature preserve recently decreed by the State Great Khural. For he did not only develop the respective idea, but also initiated and lead the talks with the persons concerned at local, regional and national levels. In this process he explored persistently and patiently the needs and concerns of the various decision-makers and achieved the important first break-through in the acceptance of a park extension. This commitment is now bearing fruit.

ITG: Mr. Ganbaatar, the decision to enlarge the Great Gobi B SPA must be the fulfilment of a dream. How confident were you that the proposal would not be declined?

O. Ganbaatar: The first proposal for the enlargement of Great Gobi B SPA was submitted to the Mongolian Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism (MNET) in November 2013. Over the last five years, the proposal was proffered by four Ministers to three Governments and two Parliaments. Several times it was submitted to Government, and once to Parliament, without being approved in the past. Right after the appointment of the current Minister of Environment and Tourism of Mongolia, N. Tserenbat, the Protected Areas management teams in the first briefing meeting again pointed out the importance of approving the SPA enlargement in the near future; otherwise it would have had to be re-submitted to the government after the 2020 elections.

ITG: It was you who came up with the idea to enlarge the Great Gobi B SPA. What made you develop this bold thought, and what was your main goal?

O. Ganbaatar: I came up with this idea after the 2009-2010 winter dzud (unusually severe winter). That winter khulan and goitered gazelle sought refuge outside the SPA territory in the west, which was confirmed by Dr. Petra Kaczensky's research. Also, water points of particularly importance for wildlife, such as Shiiryn Us, Tsagaan Gol, Yolkhon and Uvchuu, were located outside the SPA border. Discussions with local authorities and citizens showed that we had a common understanding of this idea and that they also supported it. For example, Bugat soum (district) is planning to put Khuvchiin range, and Bulgan soum the Baitag mountain, under strict protection by the state; and these protected areas shall be included in these districts' development plans. A main reason for the support by local communities is their understanding that mining has a negative impact on pasture and is less likely to contribute to local development.

ITG: Who helped you to get support for enlarging the park, and does this decision influence the work of you and your team in organizational, conceptual or operational terms?

O. Ganbaatar: We received a lot of support from local authorities and communities. Especially the rangers were instrumental for getting support from local people. Our team worked very close with the Aimag (province) Citizens' Representative Khurals (councils), and there was a great support from the Environment and Tourism Agency. The soums' elected Citizens' Khural representatives were particularly supportive. On the next level, the MNET, the Department Head of Protected Areas Management and his specialists played a central important role in the discussion within Government and Parliament. In the future, the staff of the administration of Specially Protected Areas will need to increase.
Also I would like to thank ITG and its Honorary President Prof. Thomas Pfisterer for their great support and dedication to organizing many important high-level meetings regarding the park extension.

Photo: Rebekka Blumer

ITG: Are the advantages brought about by the enlargement of the Great Gobi B SPA more qualitative – i.e. an increase in habitats and life forms that were previously missing in the protected area – or more of a quantitative kind, i.e. an increase in size of already existing ecosystems?

O. Ganbaatar: Something of both. With the doubled surface of the SPA, the endangered, rare species of animals, plants and ecosystems of this region will enjoy protection in a much larger area. This will also include Lake Alag, the largest lake of the southern Altai Gobi. And of course, newly added areas will be protected from ecological hazards of mining.

ITG: To a conservationist, the decision to enlarge the park is great. How do the residents see it? How many families are affected, and how will their lives change?

O. Ganbaatar: As the park extension includes many herders' winter and spring pastures as well as water points, it will significantly impact their lives. We will thus show in a detailed survey how many households will be better off or not. Any negative effects shall have to be suitably coordinated and regulated. We hope that most local residents will support the new situation.

ITG: How can specific concerns and problems be addressed which the park enlargement may induce among residents?

O. Ganbaatar: We need to resolve concerns and problems with herders on the basis of cooperation and agreement. It is our responsibility to provide citizens with proper information. During the process of redesigning the core zone of the SPA, herders shall move out from the SPA territory. Since we will need to increase the number of rangers, we plan choosing the additional staff from the local candidates.

ITG: Will the enlargement also produce opportunities for the districts concerned?

O. Ganbaatar: I'm sure that the SPA extension will open multiple opportunities in the region. Most importantly, rare, endangered species and ecosystems of our region receive effective protection. For this there is still much work to be done in the future.

A giant gift – with a tail

Nine thousand square kilometers newly put under national protection: most conservationists vainly dream of it all their life. With a new area of around 18'000 km² Great Gobi B SPA belongs in the top league: only about 25 nature preserves world-wide exceed 10'000 km² in size.

This giant gift was made by the Mongolian members of parliament to their nature conservation authority, ITG, and many conservationists in Mongolia and all over the world. Accordingly huge is our delight that the rare, highly specialized life forms building the Dzungarian Gobi's fragile ecosystem now find protection in additional areas.

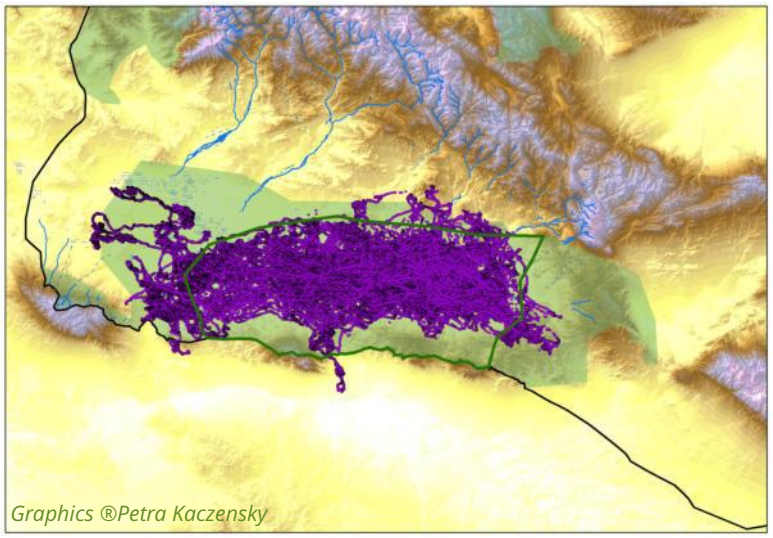
However, delight is not sufficient. An array of tasks awaits our attention which all need to be tackled fast:

Marks and maps

The borders of the newly protected areas need to be demarcated so that the resident population, passers-through and visitors know where the protected area begins and which rules apply in it. Moreover, residents must be informed about the changes. Also, there is the laborious task of adapting all maps of the area and, where data are lacking, the mapping of vegetation and its use by both wildlife and nomadic livestock.

Park staff and patrol vehicles

Quite obviously the protection of a surface doubled since the previous state can only be achieved with additional rangers. The need will likely be around five additional specialists. These must be equipped, educated by experienced game wardens and trained in the practical application of their knowledge. Patrols in the extended area will also require additional patrol vehicles (motorbikes and jeeps). The unavoidable adaptations to the increased area will also result in an increase in the costs of equipment, operations, maintenance and repairs – an additional load on ITG, which is financing these expenses, whilst the ranger salaries are paid by the Mongolian state.



The park extension enlarges the Great Gobi B strictly protected area (shape framed in dark green) by the pale green area. The black line is the national frontier to China. Purple: khulan migrations 2002-2010. The park now offers not only future habitat for takhi, it also meets the needs of far-ranging species such as khulan, for which important winter range is added in the west. In the southwest and east it now comprises important mountain habitats inhabited by argali (wild sheep), Siberian ibex and snow leopards.

"The long-awaited park extension very much motivates our organization of volunteers financed by donations, but it also commits us financially.

Monitoring

The tasks of the park rangers, notably the observation and documentation of habitat use by various species such as takhi, khulan and goitered gazelle, must be extended onto a much larger area. This requires adaptations in the organization and definition of current tasks. Illegal activities such as poaching or gold-digging still need to be effectively intercepted, despite a massively longer internal border.

Research

The extension of the protected area entails the review and partial revision or extension of specific research goals. For example, the enlargement leads to the inclusion of more mountain habitat and hence mountain species (argali, Siberian ibex, snow leopard). For the regular point counts of big game the area of operation will have to be adapted, including potentially the counting methods.

Management

The organizational, conceptual, administrative and operational management of the enlarged nature preserve must also be checked for necessary adaptation and according updates. Respective modifications already form part of the ongoing upgrade of the management plan.

Overall, there is an increase in the requirements for professional management of this biosphere reserve of international importance. This applies in several respects, including finances. This very much motivates our organization of volunteers financed by donations, but it also commits us. Hopefully we can count on you as our loyal donors! We cordially thank you in advance for any support. Every amount counts and benefits the program directly. As you know, we spare ourselves a large administrative overhead.

Most of the 53 foals of 2018 were born in the second half of May and the first half of June. Almost every fourth foal disappeared (a total of 12). The likely cause is a wolf pack in the Takhi us area, where 9 of the 12 lost foals were born while only a fifth of the harems live there. In the remainder of the protected area less than 10% of the foals were lost.

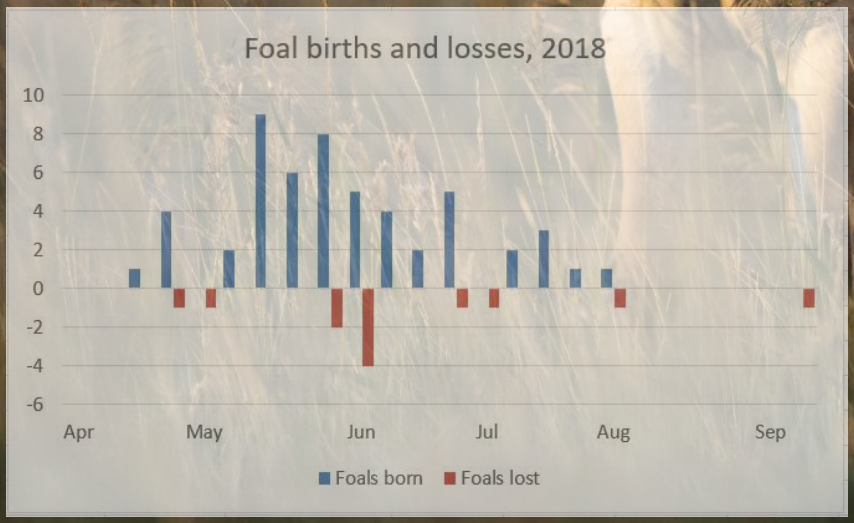


Photo: © Cyril Ruoso

Hopefully we can count on you as our loyal donors!“

Bayanzurkh Rotary Club donates USD 5000.- !

In 2016, a bore hole drilled in the Takhin tal ranger camp with funds from the Czech Development Aid hit water at a depth of 140 m. Having established a water catchment in the subsequent year, this year saw the building of a well house complete with a solar well. For accomplishing this work the Bayanzurkh Rotary Club (Bayanzurkh being a district of Ulaanbaatar) made the very generous donation of USD 5000.- which we would like to thank for cordially herewith. The water brought to ground level now has to be sent through a frost-proof pipeline to the park headquarters building, 500 m distant, in order to connect it to running water. The associated infrastructural measures form one of the focus tasks of this year's work. They will be further discussed in the next Takhi Post.

Building the new well house in Takhin Tal. To turn the bore hole into the comfort of running water requires various infrastructural activities, which form a focus task of this year's work.

Thank you, Mirjam!

Actions speak louder than words. Our conservation work would be impossible without people living this credo. One of them is the Swiss biologist Mirjam Wuersch. It began in 2004, when she procured and coordinated, as part of her work for Wildlife Park Zurich, veterinary certificates, CITES documents and other papers needed for transporting takhi to Mongolia. In 2013 she was elected as member of the ITG Board. Volunteering as communications officer, she rebuilt the contents of the ITG website from scratch in both German and English. She also prepared board meetings and presidential tasks, wrote the minutes and task lists and grant requests addressed to foundations. She acted as first information contact for media and organizations, made presentations about the takhi and organized public events for recruiting members. In 2013 she made her first trip to Mongolia to implement the Mongolian version of the website and get to know the program on site. In this context she attended the first discussions about the park extension. In 2014 and 2016 she wrote the minutes of project meetings of the then ITG presidents. In 2017 she lead Stephan Siegfried, president of the Jean-Pierre und Sonja Siegfried Foundation, to Takhin tal, where he visited the program which had been decisively supported by his late father. In 2018 Mirjam resigned from her mandate for health reasons, but she continues to follow the program with intense interest.
ITG, the ITG Board and the project team cordially thank Mirjam Wuersch for her energetic and effective commitment and wish her all the best for her future.

Enkhsaikhan Namtar strikes a new path

The long-term director of the Mongolian ITG office, Enkhsaikhan Namtar, has left ITG at the End of 2018 to pursue a new professional challenge. He had earned his M.Sc. diploma from TU Munich with a thesis on wolf feeding ecology, and subsequently worked for ITG, newly established at the time. Since 2006 he lead our office in Ulaanbaatar, representing ITG towards authorities at local, regional and national levels and acting as contact person for NGOs, companies and other entities. He played a key role in the annual transports of takhi to Mongolia, for which he energetically procured the voluminous import documentation and coordinated the transports of the airlifted Wild Horses from the airfield to the accommodation enclosures. He also acted as link to the ranger team in the Great Gobi B SPA, accounting for project budgets and coordinating translation, layout and printing of information materials for the Mongolian public.
Mr. Enkhsaikhan made an important contribution to reintroducing the takhi in the Dzungarian Gobi. The ITG Board is indebted to him for his many years of commitment to the takhi and ITG, and wishes him success and contentment in his new professional career.

Species portrait: Saxaul

Inconspicuous and unsightly it may seem; but it is one of the ecologically most critical life forms of the Gobi: the saxaul (*Haloxylon ammodendron*). Only few plant species and even fewer ligneous plants are capable to withstand the extreme desert climate of the Gobi. To do so they need adaptations; some don't absorb carbon dioxide by day, but at night, storing it for the diurnal photosynthesis. Others have very deep-reaching roots and minute leaves. This also applies to saxaul, which tolerates dry, saline, nitrogen-impoverished soils and strong winds. In the winter-cold deserts and semi-deserts of Central Asia, this bush reaching 10 m of height and his sister species, *H. aphyllum* (Black Saxaul) und *H. Persicum* (White Saxaul) form little groves. Often they are the only bush- or tree-like plants in dune fields, sandy plains, salt or clay pans, dry ravines or rocky outcrops. Saxaul grows in all eco-regions of the Gobi desert. Of a lucid green color when young, it later turns grey-green and develops hard, brittle wood with a thick spongy bark that stores water. In young specimens the far-reaching succulent root system, which digs down for up to 10 m, grows faster than the stems above ground. The leaves and the yellow flowers are very small, minimizing water loss. In exchange, the twigs contribute to photosynthesis.

Saxaul bloom from late summer into fall; the rather short-lived seeds ripen in spring and are shed in summer, followed by rapid germination in early fall. Under favorable conditions saxaul can live for several decades and form "forests" in mass stocks. In Southern Mongolia alone these cover an area of 45'000 square kilometers. In contrast, saxaul bushes are widely scattered in more difficult locations, but also form the dominant vegetation. As saxaul can tap deep water reservoirs, it is relatively independent of the local precipitation. Moreover, it forms an important carbon dioxide dump in arid regions. In dry, winter-cold ecosystems, the subterraneous biomass predominates, thus withdrawing relatively much CO_2 from the carbon cycle – in the case of the saxaul, 20t/ha. Moreover, saxaul stabilizes eroding soils, thus reducing the risk of sand and salt dust dispersal, forms topsoil and regulates the ecosystem's water balance through casting shade and reducing evaporation. As a stronghold against desertification it forms a critical niche in the Gobi.

So many uses do not remain unnoticed. To small and large species of wildlife, saxaul forests offer food, protection from wind, and cover. For the saxaul sparrow (*Passer ammodendri ammodendri*) their seeds are an important aliment. Saxaul grasshoppers eat saxaul and are a protein source for other species. Commensals and parasites, too, use this bush: often it is covered in dark cone-shaped galls, and the saxaul long-horned beetle (*Turcmenigena varentzovi*) parasitizes the Black Saxaul. The root system is tapped by the parasitic desert cistanche (*Cistanche deserticola*), an important medicinal plant.

Saxaul is also intensively used by man. For nomads it is often the sole source of drinking water and wood in the desert. From Turkmenistan to Inner Mongolia, nomads and herdsmen squeeze drinking water from the bark, use the wood for fires and for dyeing wool, and let their herds browse it. However, with increasing population and ever larger herds this use turns out to be no longer sustainable. In recent years the saxaul forests have been shrinking dramatically – by about 50% in only 25 years! – and were no longer able to regenerate. The rapid reduction in their ground cover leads to increasing erosion and desertification and to more frequent regional sand storms. According to recent estimates, saxaul distribution in Central Asia has dropped to about 25% of the potential natural saxaul cover[1]. This has grave consequences for the biodiversity of deserts and the use that these ecosystems provide.

In southwestern China saxaul is being reforested at a large scale to stop the desertification of entire swathes of land, to serve as windbreak and to prevent dune formation. However, this undertaking requires a long breath, for saxaul regrows only slowly after clearing and needs regular care.

The desert cistanche (Cistanche deserticola) is an Orobanchacea parasitizing the Black Saxaul. Lacking chlorophyll, it draws water and nutrients from the host plant's root system. It contains about 25 volatile and more than 100 non-volatile compounds and is used as immune stimulant, aphrodisiac, anti-oxidant and neuroprotective[2]. Extracts isolated from cistanche – in Chinese, Rou Cong Rong – have been used in China for almost 2000 years. In recent years, however, demand has been increasing sharply. Therefore, this species, too, is vulnerable (CITES Appendix 2). Both its stocks and range are shrinking. It suffers from the decline of its host species, which is overused for firewood.

[1] *N.Thevs, W.Wucherer, A.Burasa, Journal of Arid Environments, Vol. 90, March 2013. doi: 10.1016/j.jaridenv.2012.10.013*
[2] *Front Pharmacol. 2016; 7: 41. Published online 2016 Mar 1. doi: 10.3389/fphar.2016.00041*

What we need your help for

Conservation work is not always spectacular. However, routine jobs in the background make a project successful. Our examples show how much you can achieve with your contribution. Each donation is valuable and most welcome.

You pay a ranger his daily salary and for the use of his material.

You fill the gasoline tank of a patrol vehicle.

You contribute to the maintenance and repair of heavily strained patrol vehicles.

You contribute to supplying our Takhin tal ranger camp with running water.

You enable the ranger patrols of one month.

You help to finance the ranger training for the large mammals census in 2020.

Join the ‚Friends of the Wild Horse'!
Membership for private persons **CHF/USD 50.-**
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Donation account

Aargauische Kantonalbank
CH-5001 Aarau
Account number (IBAN): CH07 0076 1016 0117 6052 3
Account 50-6-9
Beneficiary: Friends of the Wild Horse

ITG works in an honorary capacity.
Each donation is used directly for protecting the primordial Wild Horse.

Impressum

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