

Przewalski's Horse (*Equus ferus przewalskii*) Re-introduction in the Great Gobi B Strictly Protected Area: from Species to Ecosystem Conservation

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Abstract

The Przewalski's horse (*Equus ferus przewalskii* Poljakov, 1881), or "Takhi" in Mongolian, became extinct in the wild by the mid 1960's. The last recorded sightings of Przewalski's horses occurred in the Dzungarian Gobi desert in SW Mongolia, today's Great Gobi B Strictly Protected Area (SPA). A re-introduction program was initiated in 1992 and the first group of captive-born Przewalski's horses was airlifted to the SPA. Given the logistical challenges associated with such a venture, the initial project focus has been on transport logistics and the well-being of the re-introduced horses. Today, conservation efforts are spread over the entire protected area. Present day efforts include other mammals, vegetation and the local people. Due to its important symbolic value in Mongolian culture, the Przewalski's horse became an important flagship species for the protected area's conservation and management.

Key words: *Equus ferus przewalskii*, conservation, management, Mongolia, re-introduction

Introduction

The Przewalski's horse (*Equus ferus przewalskii* Poljakov, 1881), called "Takhi" in Mongolian, became extinct in the wild and has only survived due to captive breeding (Wakefield *et al.*, 2002). The last recorded sightings of the Przewalski horse in the wild occurred in the mid 1960's in the Dzungarian Gobi of Mongolia (Sokolov & Orlov, 1986). Thereafter, the species survived only due to captive breeding based on 13 founder animals (Wakefield *et al.*, 2002). The reasons for the extinction of the Przewalski's horse were seen in the combined effects of pasture competition with livestock and over-hunting.

In the 1975 the Dzungarian Gobi was declared as part B of the Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area (SPA). By the mid of 1980's the captive Przewalski's horse population had grown to over 1,000 individuals – an important pre-requisite to initiating a re-introduction program. With Mongolia's independence, a private fund and the

Mongolian Society for the Conservation of Rare Animals initiated the "Takhiin Tal" project with the support of various international sponsors (Kaczensky *et al.*, 2004).

In 1992 the first group of captive born Przewalski's horses was airlifted to Takhiin Tal at the edge of the 9,000 km² Great Gobi B SPA. In 1997 the first harem group was released into the wild from the adaptation enclosures, and 1999 the first foals were successfully raised in the wild (Slota-Bachmayr *et al.*, 2004).

International criticism and recommendations (Van Dierendonck & Wallis de Vries, 1996) resulted in the establishment of the International Takhi Group (ITG) in 1999 with the aim to continue and extend the Takhiin Tal project in accordance with the IUCN re-introduction guidelines. Today the Takhiin Tal project receives international recognition and although it is still too early to judge whether the project is a success or failure, the positive trend of the free-ranging Przewalski's horse population is encouraging (Fig. 1). However,