

WCPF Newsletter 18: May 2007

Dear Supporter,

Captive Wild Bactrian Breeding Programme, Mongolia – Genetic testing

As mentioned in Newsletter 16 and 17, Dr Pamela Burger and Katja Silbermayr from the Institute of Animal Breeding and Genetics, University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna, Austria have undertaken genetic and DNA research on the wild Bactrian camel. This was organised by Dr Chris Walzer, formerly the director of Salzburg Zoo, who is now the Zoo and Wildlife Veterinarian at the Research Institute of Wildlife Ecology, University of Veterinary Medicine in Vienna.

The interim results of their work are very encouraging. Here are comments from a recent informal report given to the WCPF by Dr Pamela Burger:

The genetic work on the camel is not completed yet, it is now starting to become interesting. Katja found in her baccelor work two fixed differences between the wild and the domestic Bactrian camels. That means we can now distinguish between them very exactly and even find a hybrid camel in a group of wild camels - If the MOTHER was domestic Bactrian.

The differences are in the mitochondrial DNA, which is transferred only from the MOTHER to the offspring. For example, if a wild bull takes a domestic female into the wild herd, we can find them and their offspring.

We followed the maternal lineage until now and Katja is now starting to investigate the nuclear DNA (genes of mother AND father) with micro-satellites. With these nuclear DNA analysis we can investigate the degree of hybridization and the genetic diversity of the Mongolian and the Chinese wild Bactrian camels. She will do this for her doctorate over the next 3 years.

I will apply for a three years grant from the Austrian Science Foundation FWF (deadline May 30th) with the project "Origin and domestication of the Bactrian camel". I want to solve the question, "Are the Wild Bactrian camels the ancestors of the domestic camels World-wide and if not, where and how did the domestication take place?"

It is a lengthy procedure, and they will require many more samples for their DNA work, however we are definitely moving in the right direction and beginning to receive the confirmation that we seek - the wild Bactrian camel does have a different genetic make-up from that of the domestic Bactrian camel. It is very important for us to refute the theory that the wild Bactrian camels are feral camels which ran away from Silk Road camel caravans.

2006 INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE WILD BACTRIAN CAMEL

A full report of the workshop was given in Newsletter 17. The papers are being printed in English, Mongolian and Chinese. WCPF has completed editorial work on some of the papers and made a financial contribution towards their printing. These Workshop papers are being published as part of the UNDP MSP project for the Great Gobi Specially Protected Area 'A'. WCPF co funded the conference and the publication of the papers with UNDP as part of the UNDP/GEF "Conservation of the Great Gobi and its Umbrella Species Project" (Great Gobi Project). As a result of this Great Gobi Project there is now a new Management Plan for the Great Gobi Special Protected Area 'A' and our Mongolian Project Director will be working closely with them on all aspects of the plan which relate to the wild Bactrian camel.

MANAGEMENT PLAN AND INTERNATIONAL STUD BOOK

Co-operation with the Zoological Society of London (ZSL)

On 8 March 2007 the WCPF signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Zoological Society London (ZSL). The ZSL is already working in Mongolia and very interested in extending their scientific work to include the wild Bactrian camel. With the success of the captive Bactrian camel breeding centre, their knowledge of captive breeding programmes is vital, particularly their expertise in animal release programmes. The MOU will make it possible for close co-operation on these issues.

The captive wild Bactrian camel breeding programme at Zakhyn Us is successful, but this success has raised many issues common to other captive breeding programmes.

For example:

1. What do we do with surplus young wild Bactrian males?
2. How do we extend the holding area when wild Bactrian camel numbers increase beyond its capacity?
3. Do we release surplus wild Bactrian camels back into the wild, and if we do how and where and under what control?
4. How do we ensure the long-term sustainability of the project?

These issues need to be discussed with ZSL and all options considered, and if a Management Plan is developed this can be part then of the strategic plan for the protection and conservation of the wild Bactrian camel in both China and Mongolia.

The co-operation work has already started and Oliver Duprey, the camel keeper at the London Zoo, is travelling to Mongolia at the beginning of May and will spend three weeks studying and working with the captive wild Bactrian camels at the Zakhyn Us breeding centre. He is doing this as a voluntary assignment, both in his own time and partly at his own expense, which shows his commitment to camels. We hope that Oliver will bring back with him positive points for inclusion in the Management Plan.

EDGE – WILD ANIMALS ON THE EDGE OF EXTINCTION

The ZSL launched a programme called EDGE in March to support wild mammals which are on the edge of extinction. If you want to visit the website click on www.wildcamels.com and on our website look for links to ZSL/EDGE. Under the EDGE criteria the wild Bactrian camel is listed as the eighth most critically endangered mammal in the world. We are pleased to say that with the successful launch of the EDGE programme there has been a great deal of publicity for the wild Bactrian camel. They have an EDGE blog page and they plan to include reports from Oliver Duprey during his visit to Zakhyn Us and the EDGE Fellows.

Specifically:

With money raised from the EDGE initiative ZSL has established an EDGE scientific fellowship for a Chinese and Mongolian scientist to research aspects of the wild Bactrian camel. Adiya, a Senior Researcher from the Institute of Biology Ulaan Baator, Mongolia has been selected to be the Mongolian Fellow and Yuan Lei, Assistant Director, Wild Camel Protection Office, Institute of Environmental Protection, Urumqi, the Fellow from China

Discovery Television are making a programme on the wild Bactrian camel and WCPF will have a significant input. They hope to film at Zakhyn Us, the captive wild Bactrian camel breeding site in May. Because it is easier for TV companies to operate in Mongolia than in China, I am anxious that equal emphasis is given to China's wild Bactrian camels where the numbers exceed those in Mongolia and where their genetic make-up may indeed even be purer.

INTERNATIONAL STUD BOOK

It is essential now the captive breeding centre animals are producing wild Bactrian camel off-spring, that an International Stud Book is established for the wild Bactrian camel. This will be done with ZSL as part of the MOU and our project director, Bilgee, is coming for two week's training with ZSL in June 2007, to learn the SPARKS software systems for the International Stud Book. He will be at the London Zoo for the first well and also at Whipsnade. This will be a great opportunity for Bilgee and we are confident that he will acquire the necessary knowledge and expertise without too much difficulty.

MONGOLIAN NGO

As part of our strategy to assist in the development of long term sustainable solutions for the conservation and protection of the wild Bactrian camel in Mongolia, WCPF is working with the Project Co-ordinator to establish a Mongolian registered NGO (non- governmental organisation) for the protection and conservation of the wild Bactrian camel. It should be registered by May or June 2007.

BACTRIAN CAMELS ACROSS EUROPE

FUND RAISING AND PUBLIC AWARENESS

WCPF is considering a plan to walk two domestic Bactrian camels from the eastern part of Europe to England during the summer of next year 2008 to raise awareness of the plight of the wild Bactrian camel and money for the work of WCPF to protect them in China and Mongolia. The plan is in its infancy but we already have a home for them in this country and sponsorship to purchase them. We are at the moment looking at Zoos in Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Spain and Portugal to see if we can identify and purchase a suitable pair of female Bactrian camels. John Hare accompanied by a Mongolian herdsman to look after the Bactrian camels would walk the two Bactrian camels from the Zoo to England. WCPF is encouraging all members and supporters to sponsor John Hare for each mile/kilometre of the walk. Many people have expressed an interest in walking part of the way with John Hare and the Bactrian camels and we are considering whether this is possible. We are currently considering all options and therefore welcome any and all ideas connected with this proposed project, in particular, how to attract funding, sponsorship, and media interest.

Please email John Hare direct.

SPONSORSHIP: CAPTIVE WILD BACTRIAN CAMELS

First of all thank you to all the nine members and supporters who have already generously sponsored a young wild Bactrian camel. We now have pictures of the young camel calves on our updated Website. However, to continue to protect the captive wild Bactrian camels and manage the pasture areas and water, we must have our herdsman and his assistants there on site at all times to oversee the camels' welfare. During the winter and spring months it is necessary to buy hay for them. This is expensive to buy and also to transport to the site. Medicines are required for the females and their offspring during the first five years. As the number of camels increase each year, we have additional costs of identifying and fencing new areas for pasture; and the Project Director, Bilgee works continuously with the local communities and schools to ensure they understand our work.

The good news is the success of the Project so far, however this also means more pregnant females. As a result we urgently require at least five more sponsors.

TALKS

I am always giving talks to both raise awareness of the plight of the wild Bactrian camel and funds for the work of the Foundation. As we do not have a permanent sponsor for the annual cost of running the Breeding Centre in Mongolia we are constantly fund raising. We are always interested in hearing of ideas and suggestions from members about possible fund raising activities.

Remember, we have the rights to show that wonderful film, 'The Weeping Camel' to raise money for the WCPF. If any member has a hall or suitable site that they can hire and can gather together a number of interested people, then we will certainly come and give a showing of the film. Ideas please! The showing at the British Museum in February was very successful and a donation bowl at the door raised substantial funds for our cause, from a delighted audience.

John Hare's - NEW BOOK – THE MYSTERIES OF THE GOBI

My book entitled 'The Mysteries of the Gobi: Searching for Wild Camels and Lost Cities in the Heart of Asia' is due to be published by I.B. Tauris, in April 2008. The price is £17.99 and it is hoped that we will be able to offer a substantial discount on the published price to all members and supporters. Further details will be announced in the next Newsletter.

WEBSITE CHANGES

We have updated the www.wildcamels.com (<http://www.wildcamels.com>) website and now have a Shop Page showing items which can be purchased to support the work of the Foundation. Payment can now be made by Paypal; UK/Euro/USDCheque or bank transfer. Details are on the website.

We are also planning to keep updating the Shop Page especially when we have a range of unique items made by our herdsman's wife from wild Bactrian camel hair.

MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

Most members have renewed their annual membership for 2005/2006, but if you haven't, please send £15 (or its equivalent in foreign currency). If you are paying in US dollars or Euros you can also transfer funds direct into the WCPF's Euro or US dollar accounts. Please email us and ask for the bank transfer details.

EMAIL ADDRESS

IF YOU HAVE AN EMAIL ADDRESS PLEASE SEND IT TO US TO SAVE POSTAGE AND OTHER COSTS. PLEASE REMEMBER TO LET US KNOW IF YOU CHANGE YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS.

Thank you once again for all your generous and highly valued support.

Yours faithfully,

John Hare