

WCPF Newsletter 6: September 2001

Dear Supporter,

In order to raise awareness for the critically endangered wild Bactrian camel and to raise funds for the captive wild Bactrian camel breeding programme in Mongolia, three trustees of the WCPF are attempting to travel across the Sahara desert from lake Chad to Tripoli beginning on October 3rd 2001. The expedition will take three and a half months. What follows is a resume of the expedition which has been supported financially by National Geographic Magazine.

Proposed expedition with camels from Lake Chad in Nigeria to Tripoli in Libya to raise international awareness of the plight of the critically endangered wild Bactrian camel in China.

The Wild Bactrian Camel

The wild Bactrian camel, the remarkable ancestor of all domestic camels lives in three separated habitats in China and one in Mongolia. It is critically endangered. There are approximately 660 surviving in China and 350 in Mongolia. Their numbers are decreasing each year. In China they survive in the Gashun Gobi, one of the most hostile regions on earth. For 45 years, this area of the Gashun Gobi was the nuclear test site area of China. In spite of this, the wild Bactrian camel survived and is apparently breeding naturally. In some areas in the absence of fresh water, it has adapted to drinking salt water slush which the domestic camel will not touch.

Samples of skin taken from the remains of dead wild Bactrian camels have been sent to scientists for genetic DNA testing. The results have been remarkable. Each skin sample has shown two or three distinct genetic differences to the domestic Bactrian camel and a 3% base difference. This answers the charge that the wild Bactrian camel is a domestic runaway. The wild Bactrian camels in the Gashun Gobi are the only herds which are completely isolated from domestic Bactrian camels. This lack of an opportunity to hybridize is what makes their survival so vital. It is these remnant herds that the Wild Camel Protection Foundation is striving to save, by establishing, with Chinese government support, the 65,000 square kilometre, Arjin Shan Lop Nur Nature Reserve.

Since the cessation of nuclear tests, the wild Bactrian camel faces new threats; highly toxic illegal mining and the callous hunting for sport of a species which is now more endangered than the giant panda. The Wild Camel Protection Foundation, a UK based charitable trust with Jane Goodall as its patron, was established in 1997 to protect the wild Bactrian camel. To date the Foundation has raised \$200,000 from international trusts and companies. It is continuously fundraising or organising activities like this proposed Saharan journey to raise the much need funds to continue this vital work. The first phase of the Nature Reserve construction is complete, but much more work, including the opening of a second Nature Reserve in China and the establishment of a captive wild Bactrian camel breeding programme in Mongolia urgently needs to be done.

THE PROPOSED EXPEDITION

In order to raise international awareness and further funds for wild Bactrian camel protection, three of the Trustees of the Wild Camel Protection Foundation, are proposing to travel across the Sahara from Lake Chad to Tripoli using domestic camels. All four of the expedition members have undertaken expeditions in the Gashun Gobi desert of China. The expedition in the autumn of 2001 will follow an old slaving route from Kukawa in Nigeria to Tripoli in Libya. In 1906, a similar journey was made by a well-known African educationalist and explorer Hanns Vischer. The expedition will follow his tracks and record the changes that have taken place in the last 100 years to the people, to their culture and to the archaeological remains that are still locked in the desert sands.

In particular, the expedition will enable the Chinese scientist to assess the problems of Sahelian

desertification and desert degradation and to relate them to their own experiences of desertification problems in the Gobi desert of China. This is an increasing problem which on an annual basis, is depriving farmers working on the fringe of the desert of their livelihood. A realistic assessment of similar problems in the Sahara will enable the scientist to put forward proposals to his own government and further the realisation that the problems of the desert are global, not parochial.

All funds raised by the expedition will be put towards saving the wild Bactrian camel in China and Mongolia.

Expedition Logistics

Route: The expedition will start from Kukawa in northern Nigeria proceeding across Niger along the route taken by Hanns Vischer via Nguimi, Moul, Ngourti, Bedouaram, Agadem, Dibella, Bilma, Aney, Yeggouba, Yat, Bur Haj Tahir, Bir al War to the Libyan border at Tummo. At Tummo the Nigerian herdsmen will be repatriated with their camels and it is hoped that fresh camels can be obtained at Tummo in Libya with fresh camel herdsmen to undertake the second stage of the journey. The expedition will continue to follow Hanns Vischer's route via Tajihiri, Al Quatrun, Mestuta, Murzuq, Agar, Tekertiba, Wunzerig, Weina, Mukia, Bir Taboni, Mizda and thence to Tripoli.

Estimated mileage. Kukawa to Tripoli 1,540 miles

Estimated journey time: three months three weeks:

Estimated departure date: October 1st

Estimated arrival date: January 15th

Personnel: John Hare, Jasper Evans, Professor Yuan Guoying, Johnny Paterson.

Guide and herdsmen: four (subject to advice).

Camels: two per person plus fourteen for water and supplies. Total of 25 camels (subject to advice).

Expedition to be supplied at Maiduguri in Borno, northern Nigeria and in Gatrun, Libya.

Two schools one in the United Kingdom and one in China will be linked into the expedition via email and the WCPF website. As part of an environmental education project they will look at the wild Bactrian camel and its desert habitat and the threats posed to both in China and Mongolia. They will also study the deserts of Africa and China and Mongolia and compare the two desert regions.

Captive Wild Bactrian Camel Breeding Programme

As members are aware the WCPF is currently working in China with the State Environment Protection Administration (SEPA) to try and protect the wild Bactrian camel in the wild. It has the full support of the Chinese government both at national and provincial levels, the WCPF has assisted with the establishment of the new Arjin Shan Lop Nur Nature Reserve, an area of 65,000 sq kms in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in China. This reserve will not only protect the wild Bactrian camel, but many other endangered species of fauna and flora which live there. However, it is not the total answer to protecting this unique animal. The WCPF is already in discussions with SEPA and the Gansu Province Environmental Protection Bureau (GEPB) to establish another Nature Reserve in the north of Gansu Province in an area contiguous with the Mongolian Great Gobi Reserve 'A'. The wild Bactrian camels in this protected area in Mongolia migrate across the international border into China and less than half return. They are either hunted or die from eating vegetation poisoned by potassium cyanide, one of the by-products of illegal gold mining. The concern of the Wild Camel Protection Foundation is that even with two Nature Reserves in China, the economic pressure on land from natural resource

development is such that the long term future for the wild Bactrian camel is not certain.

The wild Bactrian camels' elusiveness gives them some protection against hunters, but may actually put the survival of the species even more at risk. Only fifteen wild Bactrian camels are in captivity in China and Mongolia. With so few captive animals, the whole species could be wiped out if their natural habitats in China and Mongolia were destroyed. It is therefore important to breed enough animals in captivity to insure against this possible disaster. As each female camel can have young at most once every two years, relying on natural methods would permit the numbers to rise very slowly. When the Przewalski horse (Takhi) (*Equus przewalskii*), the Asian wild horse, died out in the wild in 1969, there were hundreds of captive horses in zoos around the world. This is not the case with the wild Bactrian camel.

This is why the WCPF, after much thought and careful consultation with scientists, has decided that a captive wild Bactrian camel breeding programme is vital. However, the WCPF does not want to operate a breeding programme other than in a country when the wild Bactrian camel still exists in the wild. Mongolia not only has some of the last herds of genetically pure Bactrian camels, but a suitable area to enable such a programme to be established. An Australian scientist who breeds racing camels in Dubai, Dr Alex Tinson, has developed a process called 'embryo transfer' which is similar to human IVF techniques. It would make it possible to increase the numbers of wild Bactrian offspring each year by using surrogate domestic Bactrian camels to carry the embryos of the wild Bactrian camel. Dr Tinson will be working with Mongolian scientists and if the experiment proves successful, Dr Tinson will teach his techniques to Mongolian scientists so that they can continue the breeding programme. There will be many benefits to the people of Mongolia, involving people living near the protected area in the programme, and the protection and stewardship of the environment, to name two.

For the wild Bactrian camel, an animal not yet fully studied or understood by scientists, the proposed programme provides a unique opportunity to ensure its survival into the future. The wild Bactrian camel might, in its turn, yield secrets which enables man to survive on a planet where fresh water supplies are decreasing rapidly.

The Mongolian Ministry of Nature and the Environment has set aside an area in Umnugobi Province of Mongolia, where the WCPF can establish the captive wild Bactrian camel breeding programme. As the Foundation will be working with Mongolian scientists from the University in Ulaanbaator they have been consulted regarding the suitability of the area for the programme.

FUNDING FOR THE WILD BACTRIAN CAMEL BREEDING PROGRAMME

Funding required for this programme \$1,500,000.

The project is starting in Stages and the first breeding programme should hopefully commence in April 2002.

We have been approached by a number of people and organisations wanting to sponsor a young camel.

The cost of sponsoring a new born camel for five years is £500 per year or £2,500 for five years. (\$700. per year or \$3,500). This covers the cost of winter feed, the herders to protect the young camels from wolves and medical costs.

If you would like to participate in this sponsorship programme please email Kate Rae , a WCPF trustee at the following email address:
krae77777@aol.com

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AWARENESS PROGRAMME

A part of the work of WCPF involves multi language environmental education materials for

schools. We have a series of books planned for distribution to school children in China and Mongolia. They concern the wild Bactrian camel, its desert habitat, the Gobi and the Gashun Gobi and other endangered species which live in this desert habitat. The WCPF has full responsibility for the preparation all the educational materials. However to ensure maximum distribution in both countries we are working with SEPA in China and the MNE in Mongolia and also with Jane Goodalls Roots and Shoots programme in China.

The 'KING of the GOBI'

Language editions of the children's book, The King of the Gobi are being translated into Uighur and Kazakh. The Mongolian and Chinese versions have been printed and the Mongolian edition will be distributed to schools in Mongolia while the Chinese edition will be distributed through the Chinese Roots and Shoots network. Shell, China, generously contributed funds for the Chinese version and GTZ the Germany government aid agency contributed funds for the Mongolian edition.

We have managed to obtain an invitation for Roots and Shoots to enter Mongolia and establish their schools programme there. The next children's book to be published will reflect on the problems encountered by the wild Bactrian camel in its central Asian habitat. It will deal with the problems of desertification and desert degradation and GTZ has already expressed an interest in additional funding for this book.

The environmental educational books have the full support of the CMS (Convention on Migrating Species) office in Bonn and they have been actively seeking funding for this programme in Mongolia.

NATURE RESERVE PROTECTION CHINA

Arjin Shan Lop Nur Nature Reserve and proposed Gansu Reserve

The first phase in the establishment of the Arjin Shan Lop Nur Nature Reserve is now complete. All the five check-points have been built and the radios which were donated by Cable and Wireless have been installed by a team working for the British Company C&L Ltd. The headquarters of the reserve has been set up with its own office in the offices of the Xinjiang Environmental Protection Bureau and this has also been connected by radio link to the check-points. Staff have been appointed as well as a project supervisor. The WCPF has already run one management and public awareness workshop in Urumqi to assist both in training the Nature Reserve staff and raising the awareness of the communities local to the Nature Reserve as to the importance of protecting the wild Bactrian camel and its desert habitat. The workshop was successful and we are designing more for the future as they should be seen as an integral part of the education component of the project work. However, it is clear that to cover such a vast area more check-points will need to be established (possibly seven) at cost of \$10,000 each and this will all take place in a second phase of construction. The GEF funding project runs out in May. We need urgently to attract another large donor or donors to keep the project running and expanding. Our efforts are concentrated on attracting funds.

With the establishment of the Arjin Shan Lop Nur Nature Reserve, there is still one area in China where the wild Bactrian camel is unprotected. We plan to resolve this problem by establishing a second Nature Reserve south of the Mongolian border in Gansu Province, China. Wild Bactrian camels know no frontiers and international borders are meaningless. They wander south from a protected area in Mongolia, the Great Gobi protected area over the international border area into the province of Gansu and from there into the arms (in both senses) of illegal miners, hunters and adventurers in China. Again, our plans for this new Reserve are all subject to funding.

EMAIL AND WWW

REMINDER MEMBERSHIP DUES: For most members their membership fees of £15.00 or \$20.00 were due in August.

If any members have Email, please let us have the address so that we can keep you more fully informed via that medium. This will save the Foundation expense.

Please look at our updated website, <www.wildcamels.com> which over the next three and a half months will give progress reports on the Saharan expedition.

Again, many, many thanks for your continued and much valued, support.