

PRIME INTERVIEW

By ANITA FAHRNI

Horses, including the takhi, can count on Rebekka Blumer's support.

Rebekka Blumer is a Swiss business woman whose company is owned jointly with her husband, Peter Kistler. Theirs is a service company active in the field of environmental protection and activities in nature. She also owns Smart Horse Stables, supporting horse-back riding and selling the equipment involved. As a board member of the International Takhi Group (ITG), she supports as treasurer of the non-governmental organization the reintroduction of the wild horse in Mongolia. Now she is in Mongolia – in connection with this work.

You are an experienced business woman in the finance and service field. What exactly do you do?

Together with my partner, I ran a company providing medical education in the fields of oncology and hematology to doctors, nurses and patients all around the world, including Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. We organized medical seminars ranging in size from small group meetings to large conferences with 1,000 attendees. We prepared the scientific program and presentations and the conference logistics. You notice that I am referring to the past: after 20 years in this challenging international business, we retired just a few months ago.

How did you become interested in the protection of nature? Do Swiss schools and families emphasize the need to care for the environment?

I grew up in the countryside and already as a child spent a lot of time outdoors. I enjoy the beauty of nature: flowers, animals, big and small creatures. All are precious and they need our support, as nowadays mankind uses the resources of the planet too extremely, without thinking about the effects of this use. Both through our company and privately, I am supporting various conservation projects with a focus on biodiversity hotspots.

Nature conservation is a big topic in Switzerland and my country has a very strong conservation law. In primary school children already learn about wildlife, natural places and the importance of sustainable and careful management of the environment. They are taught to be ecologically sensitive. For instance, in Switzerland, more than 90 percent of the people separate their garbage and bring paper, plastic, cans, practically



A LIFELONG ENGAGEMENT FOR NATURE

their entire non-food garbage, to recycling centers. This is a great lesson for children about how to take care of the environment. Also, many people in Switzerland donate money each year to charities, including conservation projects. Helping in this way and volunteering to serve is a tradition.

As an owner of a stable, you work with domesticated horses but are now on the board of the International Takhi Group.

I grew up with horses and they play an important role in my life. I received my first own pony when I was 12 years old; it died at the age of 30! I always liked buckskin colored horses and when I bought my first American Quarter Horse, it looked like a takhi: sand brown, dorsal stripe, zebra stripes at the legs, black mane and tail and a gray mouth. Liking this kind of horses also raised my interest in takhis. I became a Friend of the Wild Horse in Switzerland. This is an association donating funds to ITG for the takhi reintroduction project in Mongolia. In 2012, there was an urgent call for a finance manager for ITG and I voiced my interest. Shortly thereafter, I got elected at the general assembly to join the board.

In the Great Gobi B SPA, nearly 200 takhi now roam in complete freedom. You have recently been there and seen several harems at a distance.

It was a fascinating experience to see the horses. When I saw for the first time the takhis roaming free in the Great Gobi B I was overwhelmed. Spending several days in the park with the rangers I saw almost all the horses, even a large group of almost 70 animals! This emotional experience proved to me the importance of donating my time to this project. The vastness of the Great Gobi B offers space for many hundreds more and there will be many more in the future. If my work will help fulfill this dream I will happily continue my support.

2017 is the 25th anniversary of the reintroduction of the takhi to Mongolia. Can it be successful in the long run?

The project of reintroducing the takhis is going very well. Every year about 30 foals are born and even though not all survive to adulthood, the population is constantly rising. Despite the threats of harsh winters, which can cause severe mortality, infectious diseases and some other challenges, ITG is convinced that a self-sustainable population of takhis can be reached.

The International Takhi Group is not interested only in the

horses.

Indeed, even though the takhi is our main focus, you cannot conserve a species without caring for its habitat, which includes a network of interacting plant and animal species. Therefore, many of ITG's activities include habitat management. A good park management by the rangers is extremely important. This means that we support the elaboration of a management plan that includes the utilization of the park by nomads and their livestock. Despite the large size of the Great Gobi B, our research has shown that the home-range of the takhis already extends beyond the park borders. For that reason, ITG supports the idea of enlarging the park.

Mongolia is not the only country where takhi roam. Just across the border in China, there are also wild horses.

In former times, the takhi's home-range extended from Mongolia and China through Central Asia all the way to Europe. Since its extinction in the wild, several visionaries have worked on bringing the takhi back to the wild. Apart from Mongolia, China started a reintroduction program in the provinces of Xinjiang and Guangzhou in the early 1990s. There is an information exchange between ITG and the Wild Horse Breeding and Research Center in Xinjiang, as partnership and cooperation in such a difficult project are very important. In the late 19th century, takhis were being hunted in northern Xinjiang, so there was a contiguous population reaching into Mongolia. This makes us ask whether suitable habitats in both countries might be reconnected through a wildlife corridor, allowing steppe animals to migrate seasonally.

You have just been with other board members in Kazakhstan.

Yes, we traveled through the vast steppe of central-western Kazakhstan with a team of biologists working on the reintroduction of khulans, another endangered equid. The solace of the great open space, watching saiga and camels in the golden steppe is just wonderful. As the khulan will be back in Kazakhstan within a few weeks after our visit, the only species missing to complete the picture of grazers and browsers there is the takhi. Hopefully, the dream of seeing takhi in Kazakhstan, too, will come true someday soon!

What can Mongolians do to support the work of the International Takhi Group?

The project in the Great Gobi B is a national Mongolian

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project but ITG is working closely with people in the government, the soums and provinces who all are very supportive. A project like the re-introduction of the takhi, undoing their extinction in the wild, is a very challenging conservation task. Its success is a reason for pride as the project was initiated by Mongolians. But to succeed, the work needs people who put their hearts into it, like the rangers working in the park. One way of helping is to support the program's goals and actions. But we also need money for salaries, cars, gasoline, infrastructure maintenance, hay and so on. I do hope that this genuinely Mongolian story of bringing the takhi home motivates many corporate and private sponsors in Mongolia to support the Friends of the Takhi with a donation.