

# ITG INTERNATIONAL TAKHI GROUP

Association for the re-introduction and conservation of  
the Przewalski's horse (takhi) in Central Asia

Annual Report 2018



## **ITG International Takhi Group**

c/o Wildnispark Zürich

Alte Sihlstrasse 38

8135 Sihlwald

+41 44 722 55 22

[info@savethewildhorse.org](mailto:info@savethewildhorse.org)

[www.savethewildhorse.org](http://www.savethewildhorse.org)

## The President's Preface

Takhi, descendants of tamed horses of the Botai culture (3000 BC) in the steppes of Kazakhstan? Thus, a domestic horse gone wild instead of a wild horse? This argument has been roaming across the media landscape since the scientific journal *"Science"* published a research paper about the genealogical history of wild horses. Respectively, ITG along with various well-known scientists do not share this interpretation of – in principle, very carefully collected – data. Let me explain why.

As a matter of fact, the Botai specialized in the use of early-bred wild horses, which is indicated by the remains of excavated enclosures, traces of horse fat on ceramic shards and damages on horse teeth - possibly caused by snaffle bits. The new phylogenetic study locates the Botai horse immediately before the still existing takhi. However, ITG considers the conclusion of takhi being direct descendants of the Botai horse as – to put it mildly – a "premature interpretation", which would by no means withstand any critical review.

The applied methodology does not allow such a conclusion; it merely shows that Botai horses and Takhi are closely related. The genetic researchers' interpretation further implies that the Botai either put an end to all wild horses in the wilderness or that all free-roaming wild horses did not have any offspring. Both seem unlikely, as there were certainly more wild horses in Central Asia than in captivity 5000 years ago. The following narrative is a much more suitable explanation in the eyes of ITG: the Botai, the first nomadic horse culture, caught, slaughtered and tamed the takhi in the steppes of Central Asia. After the early disappearance of their culture, the surviving Botai horses disappeared or escaped. Today's takhi are either descended from the same ancestors as those of the Botai horses, namely the real wild horses, or from wild horses with a small trace of Botai horses. Therefore, claiming that the Botai horses are direct ancestors of today's takhi is an inadmissible overinterpretation of the researchers.

However, beyond all academic discussions, it is certain that the takhi is the only remaining representative of an archaic horse type, and thus its protection deserves the greatest efforts.



## The takhi in the UNESCO’s biosphere reserve of the Great Gobi in Mongolia

At the end of 2018, the takhi population reached a new high of 235 individuals in the protected area; 39 foals, 30 yearlings and 166 wild horses older than two years. If the population growth observed in recent years continues, we should be able to reach the interim goal of at least 300 Takhi older than two years, the potential breeding age, by 2023. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature IUCN, the takhi population should consist of at least 1’000 animals within the reproductive age to survive in the Dzungarian Gobi. The takhi population is currently divided into 20 harems and 2 groups of bachelor stallions. The harems vary in group size between 4 and 20 individuals.



*The population development in the Great Gobi B SPA at the end of 2018*

In April, the group of takhi (including four mares transported from Europe in 2017, one mare from the previous year and a stallion, who joined the group) that spent the winter in the enclosure of Takhin tal was released without any problems. In June, Prague Zoo, with help from the air force of the Czech Republic, transported four wild horses from European zoos and animal parks to Takhin tal once again. The newcomers were selected based on the studbook of the European Endangered Species Programme (EEP). Two takhi came from the Helsinki zoo, one from the Langenberg Wildlife Park (Langnau am Albis/Switzerland) and one from the Wisentgehege Springe in Germany. The group will be released into the wild in spring 2019.



In the last few years, we have been working on the project to expand the protected area from 9'000km<sup>2</sup> to around 18'000km<sup>2</sup>. In particular, the expansion to the West and the East would add valuable steppe and semi-desert habitats. With the extension of the park, all areas currently used by wild horses would also be within the protected zone. The project has gained support from the park communities as well as the two aimags Khvod and Gobi-Altai. In 2018, the national government agreed to the expansion of the park. The only thing missing is the final decision of the national parliament.

The Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) requires all national protected areas in Mongolia to develop and periodically renew a management plan. The first plan for the GGB was created in 2011. Together with the park administration, ITG evaluated the success and weaknesses of the plan in 2018, and, based on the evaluation, developed a new draft for the ministry.

For many years, ITG has been supporting the construction, maintenance and further development of the infrastructure in the Takhin tal camp as well as the vehicle park used for the supervision and the monitoring of wild animals. In addition, ITG finances the position of a research assistant to support the director and the scientific analysis and presentation of wild horse observations.



## Cooperation with politics and research

ITG has been working under the umbrella of an agreement with the Ministry for Environment & Tourism (MET) and maintains regular exchanges with the Mongolian authorities. In summer 2018, our board member Rebekka Blumer was able to renew the relation- and friendships with many committees and people during her visit. In addition, the involvement of the director of the Department for Protected Areas in the board of ITG enables the Mongolian authorities to be better involved in the work of ITG (see chapter “The association ITG”).

The three re-introduction projects of takhi in Mongolia – Hustai Nuuru, Chomin tal, Takhin tal – have been coming together on a regular basis to exchange information. In 2018, the three projects developed a joint umbrella program, which was then presented to MET.

Since the ITG president visited the authorities in the neighboring Chinese province of Xinjiang in 2015, ITG, in collaboration with Prague Zoo, has tried to organize a transport of five Takhi stallions to the Chinese breeding station Jimsar - north of Urumqi. It almost succeeded in 2018. But there are still a few more administrative obstacles to overcome for the wild horses to cross the borders.

The cooperation between ITG and China is of great strategic importance, as four-fifths of the huge Dzungarian Basin is located in Xinjiang. Furthermore, China is very committed to the conservation and reintroduction of wild horses.

The contacts made with Kazakhstan in 2017 were also strengthened in the reporting year. In April 2018, as part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> CAMI workshop (Central Asian Mammal Initiative of the Bonn Convention) on the island of Vilm in Germany, ITG’s president, the focal point for the wild horse, was able to discuss the opportunity of the takhi’s re-introduction into the Kazakh steppe. Additionally, the authorities of Uzbekistan have also expressed their interest in working with ITG during the workshop.



The research priorities developed at the ITG workshop in 2017 in Switzerland have started to bear fruits in 2018. On the one hand, Lena Michler (University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart), led by Petra Kaczensky (The Norwegian Institute for Nature Research / University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna) and supported by ITG, started her research on the interactions between the nomadic culture and the management of the conservation area. On the other hand, the park's director, Ganbaatar Oyunsaikhan, together with the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, deepened their analysis of the social ethology of wild horses.

The director of the Department for Protected Areas in Mongolia has launched the idea that an official partnership between the Dzungarian Gobi National Park and a park from Switzerland could be established. ITG is very much interested in such a partnership and is currently evaluating the possibilities. Wouldn't it be great if the people behind the Freiburger horse from the Jura region in Switzerland exchanged their ideas and experiences with the people behind the takhi from the Mongolian steppe in regular meetings?

### **The publics' information**

“Do a good deed and make it known.” The ITG association wants to do both. Thus, we maintain the website [www.savethewildhorse.org](http://www.savethewildhorse.org) and annually produce two newsletters, the Takhi-Post, in German, English and Mongolian. The Takhi-Post sent out in June 2018 was under the motto “A future in the Gobi” and the one sent out in December was dedicated to the nomads in and around the protected area in the Gobi. In addition, the board members of ITG regularly speak to journalists from newspapers, magazines, radio and television. In 2018, ITG supported the production of an hour-long documentary about the resettlement of the takhi in the Gobi which was broadcasted on Mongolian television. Lastly, our board member Rebekka Blumer's trip in summer 2018 was accompanied and documented by Terra Mater.





## The ITG association

At the end of 2018, the ITG association consisted of four organizations (Langenberg Wildlife Park at Langnau am Albis; Bruderhaus Wildlife Park near Winterthur; Prague Zoo; Nuremberg Zoo) and ten natural persons, who form the Executive Board at the same time (Reinhard Schnidrig, president; Christian Stauffer, vice president; Rebekka Blumer, treasurer; Ruth Baumgartner, actuary; Sven Hoffmann, legal adviser; Anita Fahrni, assessor; Miroslav Bobek, Prague Zoo; Jaroslav Simek, Prague Zoo; Batsansar Chilkhaajav, Ministry of Environment and Tourism MET). The ITG's honorary president Thomas Pfisterer is invited to all board meetings as a guest.

In 2018, during four sessions, various meetings and a workshop the Board of Executives covered the following topics:

- renewal of the management plan for the protected area of the Gobi;
- monitoring of the takhi population living in the wilderness of the Gobi;
- transport of takhi from Europe to the protected area of the Gobi to be released;
- research priorities and research support;
- cooperation with other re-introduction projects in Mongolia, China and Kazakhstan;
- maintenance and further development of the infrastructure in the protected area of the Gobi;
- further development of the ITG's office and its activities in Ulaanbaatar

In August 2018, Mirjam Würsch left the board. The entire Board thanks Mirjam for her great support over the many years. In May 2018, the general assembly welcomed Batsansar Chilkhaajav, director of the Departement for Protected Areas of MET, as a new member of the board of executives and as a representative of the Mongolian government. Mr. Purevsuren Lundeg, ambassador of Mongolia in Switzerland, offered to represent his country during the Board meetings in Switzerland.



The board of Executives decided to increase the staff of the ITG office in Ulaanbaatar. In January 2018, Batsukh Jamiyandorj started her work and immediately showed great initiative. On the other hand, we decided to end the employment relationship with our longtime employee Enkhsaikhan Namtaar by the end of the year and to realign the position.

ITG is financially supported by the association “Friends of the Wild Horse”. With their generous donations, the loyal group of around 250 members has made ITG’s constant work possible for 20 years now.

## **Finances**

Revenue of CHF 183’572 was generated through the contributions from members, donations and the support of foundations. We owe notable contributions to the Jean-Pierre and Sonja Siegfried Foundation, the Vontobel Foundation, the Temperatio Foundation and the Fondation de Bienfaisance Jeanne Lovioz. Furthermore, ITG was taken into account during the dissolution of the Werner Stamm Foundation for the Preservation of Rare Equids and received a generous amount of money, for which many thanks go to those responsible. In addition, the association “Friends of the Wild Horse” made a substantial contribution once more.

Money was invested in the management of the protected area, the monitoring of the takhi and research activities. Thanks to a strict resource management and delays in certain projects the association ITG closes the financial year with a surplus of CHF 82’914.

The annual financial statement is available here:

[https://www.savethewildhorse.org/de/itg/downloads\\_itg.php](https://www.savethewildhorse.org/de/itg/downloads_itg.php)

Reinhard Schnidrig, President

