

WCPF Newsletter 7: March 2002

Dear Supporter,

The trans-Saharan expedition that I outlined in my last newsletter has taken place. We left Kukawa in northern Nigeria with camels on October 15th 2001 and three and a half months later on February 5th 2002 we arrived in Mizdah, a city 140 miles south of Libya. The expedition had covered 1460 miles (2400 kilometers) and had been undertaken entirely with the 25 dromedary (single-humped camels) that I had bought in Agadez, Niger. Both National Geographic Society, their magazine and the Royal Geographic Society supported and sponsored the expedition.

We followed a disused ancient camel road. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the route was discovered and pioneered by Heinrich Barth, Hornemann, Denham and Clapperton, and in 1906 by Hanns Vischer. It was one of the four great Sahara highways before the introduction of the internal combustion engine, and for over a thousand years served as a major slaving route for coastal Arabs. It had not been travelled since Vischer's day.

Apart from a satellite telephone, the expedition made no concessions to the modern world, and apart from myself, the expedition team contained two other WCPF trustees; Professor Yuan Guoying, from Xinjiang who became the first Chinese person in recorded history to cross the Sahara on a camel. Jasper Evans, a Kenyan rancher who owns 250 camels who provided invaluable assistance as the expedition vet. Lastly there was Johnny Paterson, a 36 year old ex trans-Africa truck driver. The three and a half month expedition encountered fierce sand storms, crossed deserts described as 'howling wastelands' and had to deal with highly suspicious armed police and soldiers in all the countries we crossed. We made a major discovery of hitherto undetected desert rock art while passing through northern Niger. Extremes of temperature, encounters with unreliable guides, turbulent tribesmen and 'jinns' that 'rode' the camels ensured that we had no ordinary experience.

At the end of the journey I was left with a far higher respect for the camel than I had held previously. The camel, whether sporting one or two humps, is a truly amazing creature, wonderfully adapted to cope with the harsh and varied environment that we encountered on our journey; patient, uncomplaining and extremely hard working. Our camels had been on the road for four weeks before we met up with them because they had travelled from Agadez in Niger to meet us. They had therefore been travelling for over four months, in all, when we finally called a halt, and they had covered over 4000 kilometers. As one of our Tuareg herdsmen said, 'provided you feed them properly and look after them well, they will take you on to Cairo'. I should add that the Tuaregs are highly proficient and knowledgeable camel people, who professed and showed us that they have a pact of mutual trust (amana) between themselves and camels.

When I parted from my magnificent and highly intelligent riding camel, Pasha, I was very sad indeed. I sold the camels to a Libyan tour operator and when they have recovered from their arduous journey they will be used to provide gentle holidays for tourists.

Apart from the obvious personal pleasure that this journey gave us, there was a much more important objective. This was to raise awareness for the plight of the wild Bactrian camel in China and Mongolia and to raise money for the captive Hunter Hall Wild Bactrian Camel Breeding Centre which we are currently setting up in Mongolia. I believe that we have been successful in this objective. Awareness will be raised through a book and magazine articles about the expedition and money for the project has already started to come in.

Captive Wild Bactrian Camel Breeding Programme

Soon after returning from the Saharan expedition, co-trustee Kate Rae and I set off for China and Mongolia. In Mongolia we were able to advance the establishment of a breeding centre for the captive wild Bactrian camel. The Mongolian authorities have provided a site in the South Gobi area and we reached an agreement with a Dr. Sarantuya, a consultant and former senior official in the Ministry of Environment and Nature who had been known both to Kate and myself for many years. Dr. Sarantuya has excellent relations with the Mongolian government, and she will establish a new NGO to coordinate the captive wild Bactrian camel breeding centre project. The WCPF will liaise directly with that NGO. A Mongolian scientist, Mr. Batsuuri will assist her. The university in Ulaan Baator has a special department to further the scientific research on the wild Bactrian camel. This is headed by a Professor Indra and she will advise the WPC on the scientific side and wild Bactrian camel research but the university itself will not be directly involved with administration.

We will start raising funds immediately for the construction of a one kilometre square fence. This has to be constructed before the ten captive wild Bactrian camels in Mongolia can be moved to the site from the area where they are held at the moment, close to the border with China

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 are 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. The Australian scientist, Dr Alex Tinson, has already visited Mongolia and discussed in detail with Mongolian scientists the process called 'embryo transfer' which is similar to human IVF techniques. It will 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

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 concern of the Wild Camel Protection Foundation is that the economic pressure on land from natural resource development is such, that the long term future for the wild Bactrian camel in the wild is far from certain.

FUNDING FOR THE WILD BACTRIAN CAMEL BREEDING PROGRAMME

The programme will start in May 2002 with the construction of a one kilometer square fence. This fence has to be strong enough to not only protect the female and new born wild Bactrian camels but also stop the male camels from escaping during the mating season. At present the recommendations are to build a 2 -3 metre high metal fence with metal posts every 1-2 metres. This will require the importation of materials from China.

Estimated cost for the fencing and the construction:- \$25,000.

SPONSORSHIP WILD BACTRIAN CAMELS

The wild Bactrian camels will have to be protected and fed either by hand or moved to feeding areas. This will mean paying herders to move the camels and a person on site to watch the camels daily. There will also be the cost of feed and the various medicines required for the females and their off-spring during the first five years.

A number of Foundation members, individuals and organisations have expressed an interest in showing their support by SPONSORING a young camel.

The cost of sponsoring a new born camel for five years is £500 per year or £2,500 for five years. (\$750. per year or \$3,750). This covers the cost of winter feed, the herders to protect the young camels from wolves and medical costs.

We are now ready to start this SPONSORSHIP PROGRAMME.

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

The 'KING of the GOBI'

Language editions of the children's book, The King of the Gobi have been translated into Uighur and Kazakh and will be printed next month. These copies in the two languages will be distributed in schools, towns and cities near the Nature Reserve in Xinjiang province.

The Mongolian and Chinese versions have been printed and the Mongolian edition has been distributed to schools in Mongolia. The Chinese edition has been distributed through Jane Goodall's Chinese Roots and Shoots network. A second Chinese reprint is underway and these books will be distributed throughout Xinjiang Province. Shell, China, generously contributed funds for the Chinese, Uighur and Kazakh versions and GTZ the Germany government aid agency contributed funds for the Mongolian edition.

The next environmental children's book to be published by us 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 what can be done to combat these problems. It will be prepared very shortly and hopefully distributed by the end of 2002. We have received some initial funding to cover the preparation costs for this book from the Global Wildlife Division in Bristol. We hope that THE CMS will assist once again with the Mongolian translation costs. GTZ has already expressed an interest in giving us additional funding for this book

This book is about to be reprinted in English and will be available, price £5.00 (\$7.00). If any members want to purchase a copy please email, krae77777@aol.com

We are prepared to supply a copy free to libraries, schools and environmental centres.

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 Nature Reserve has been set up with its own office in the offices of the Xinjiang Environmental Protection Institute and this has also been connected by radio link to the check-points. Headquarter

staff have been increased under a new director, Mr. Zhang. This appointment has given fresh impetus to the project.

On our recent visit to Urumqi we meet the new Director and the Head Office staff. They had just completed a week long environmental public awareness programme in Hami, a city near the Nature Reserve. The Head Office staff had prepared excellent materials explaining the reason for the new Nature Reserve and the role local people could play to protect these highly endangered animals and the fragile biodiversity of the habitat. They also posted notices explaining the Regulations governing the Nature Reserve.

To ensure the long term success of the Nature Reserve it is critical it is upgraded as soon as possible to a National Nature Reserve. This process has started and we hope to have a favourable decision in May 2002. Once it is upgraded the Nature Reserve will be given greater protection.

The UNEP/GEF funding for the Nature Reserve will finish after September this year. The Foundation has already contributed \$15,000.00 to the running costs (cost of heating checkpoints, petrol, fee for radio licence for this year) and is URGENTLY FUNDRAISING for money to enable us to continue to make this contribution. Without radios and petrol they cannot effectively operate and manage the Nature Reserve area.

LAND OWNERSHIP

It is possible for the Nature Reserve to acquire ownership of the land . An application to the Land Management Department in Xinjiang has met with some initial success. However the Nature Reserve boundary has to be ascertained and marked. Once this has been done it can be finally approved. Ownership of the land will give much more protection and power to the Nature Reserve to restrict movement of people and activities within the borders of the Nature Reserve. The area to be marked is large and the cost of sending a team of people out on a one month project is \$7,000. We are actively fund raising for this money.

BOUNDARY MARKING COST: \$7,000

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Now the Head Office staff have been appointed and several scientists from the Xinjiang Environmental Protection Institute seconded to the Head Office the Scientific Research Plan can start to be implemented in the spring of this year. The area has to be properly mapped and surveyed and detailed studies done on the biodiversity of the area; the numbers and movements of the highly endangered species and whether the present description of the areas within the Nature Reserve are accurate. It is important to realise that this area has only been open to study in the last seven years.

WCPF is applying for funding from scientific institutions around the world and also looking for scientists and universities interested in working on joint projects with the Nature Reserve and Institute scientists.

POTENTIAL THREATS

However, there is concern over the construction of a gas pipeline, planned to run from the Taklamakan desert in the far west of Xinjiang to Shanghai on the eastern seaboard. One of the routes proposed crosses the northern sector of the Reserve and would effectively cut off the Reserve from three of its check-points and decrease the size of the Reserve by about one fifth. The Xinjiang Environmental Protection Institute is proposing to send a delegation to Beijing to lobby government about this, and the WCPF will be using their contacts with international organisations and donors, should the plan develop into an established threat. We are monitoring the situation closely. There is

a second proposal to establish a leopodite mine in the dried up lakebed of Lop Nur. This is situated in the heart of the Reserve. These two developments highlight for us, the overriding importance of the captive wild Bactrian camel breeding programme. We are dealing with a situation, both in China and Mongolia, where economic pressures and developments, are constantly going to be in conflict with endangered species protection.

Gansu Province

With the economic pressure in China increasing the threat to the wild Bactrian camel numbers and the Great Gobi Special Protected Area (SPA) in Mongolia badly effected by a harsh winter drought, increased wolf predation it is URGENT the border area between Gansu Province China and Mongolia becomes a protected area or Chinese Nature Reserve. Migrating wild Bactrian camels and other endangered species from the Great Gobi SPA are not returning from China to Mongolia. These two areas one in Mongolia and the new Nature Reserve in Xinjiang are the only remaining areas where the wild Bactrian camel is to be found. WCPF has initiated discussions with Gansu Environmental Protection Bureau and will be working with them to establish a new Nature Reserve along the border area which will be contiguous with the Great Gobi SPA.

IUCN

WCPF have submitted an application to IUCN to have the *Camelus bactrianus ferus* wild Bactrian camel upgraded from critically endangered to highly endangered.

EMAIL AND WWW

If 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.