

The Serengeti of Central-Asia

Nature lovers, mammalogists, wildlife tourists, they are all familiar with the Serengeti plains in eastern Central-Africa where species like common zebra, wildebeest, African buffalo and impala inhabit the grass- and woodlands. When talking about large grazing mammal communities worldwide, Africa and the Serengeti is in most cases the example given. However, this emphasis on Africa may have prevented a similar level of (conservation) attention being given to another continent with intriguing large herbivores: Asia, in particular southern Central-Asia.

The African species attract tourists, are known amongst children and appear in numerous nature documentaries, whereas their Asian counterparts live a life in near total anonymity. Kulan, Bukhara deer and saiga are three species that inhabit Central-Asia. They all face the risk of extinction without 'prior notice' because of their relative obscurity.

Despite the fact that numbers of well-known African herbivore species have decreased over the past centuries, their populations still consist of tens of thousands of animals. The story of the Central-Asian herbivores is one of a completely different magnitude.

Intriguing names

Take the kulan for instance, a subspecies of the Asian wild ass, whose numbers have decreased dramatically in the past decades. The majority of kulans are nowadays confined to the Badkys depression in Turkmenistan where numbers just reach a few hundred. In the 19th century thousands of kulans roamed the country. The most recent decline, after a comeback in the 1980-90's, was mainly caused by poaching. WWF together with other donors and the Ministry of Ecology developed a very effective anti-poaching programme. One way of doing this is through the presence of mobile volunteer groups that report violation of

the conservation laws after which state rangers can prosecute the violators.

A species living in an entirely different habitat, the riparian forests of the Amudaria and Syrdaria river valleys, is the Bukhara deer. The number of surviving animals also consists of a few hundred. The major threat to this species is the loss of its natural habitat. Agricultural communities living around these valuable river systems demand water for their fields. This conflicts with the 'natural' water demand by the forests surrounding the rivers, forests in which the Bukhara deer live. Campaigning and other 'public relations' work in favour of this species should convince the people that a healthy environment includes the presence of these forests and its inhabitants. Initiated by the LHI and the WWF Central-Asia Programme, the Governments of Turkmenistan and the Republics of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan recently started



Bukhara deer
photo © Olga Pereladova

the procedure of signing a Memorandum of Understanding and Action Plan for Bukhara deer conservation in the framework of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS).

The most intriguing herbivore is probably the saiga, a peculiar animal with its tubeformed face. This species was subject of an international conference in May 2002, initiated by the Government of the Republic of Kalmykia and supported by CITES, CMS, LHI, WWF International and other conservation organisations. The conference took place in Elista, the capital of the Republic of Kalmykia, home of the westernmost population (the European saiga). Saiga numbers have always shown natural fluctuations but poaching for horns, which are used in traditional Chinese medicine, has become the main reason

for the steep decline in saiga numbers. Furthermore, animals are shot for consumption.

Saiga are known for their mass movements in search for food, very similar to the movements of wildebeest in Africa. This natural behaviour is crucial for their survival. At the recent conference it became more evident that saiga conservation, as a consequence of their movements, can only be carried out as a cooperation between different nations. As such, a motion was accepted from the Kazakhstan delegation, to set up a committee of all states where saiga live (including states importing saiga horns) to better coordinate conservation work.



Saiga
photo © Pavel Sorokin



Kulan
photo © Olga Pereladova

CONNECTION

PAN Parks contribute to a better appreciation of European wilderness

People in Europe are hardly aware of the beautiful wilderness that is (still) around in their own part of the world. Enthusiast tourists visit all continents to find virgin forests with large mammals in the wild, not realizing that there is no need to travel that far for that purpose. Europeans

seem familiar with the famous American National Parks like Yosemite and Yellowstone, but when it comes to National Parks in their own continent they face difficulties to mention any. Lack of knowledge is the cause for lack of appreciation, pride and protection of nature in their own backyard.

PAN (Protected Area Network) Parks, founded in 1997 by WWF and Molecaten Group, a Dutch leisure company, aims to improve nature protection by sustainable tourism development. Tourism can generate increased value (and funding) for conservation goals; via tourism, natural areas can themselves be the base (or natural capital) for a sustainable local economy.

PAN Parks works closely together with protected areas that meet high criteria regarding nature and sustainable tourism, and local, national and international partners. Thus it creates opportunities for unique partnerships with businesses, universities, other conservation organisations and for WWF internally; LHI for example is a close partner for PAN Parks.

On the basis of highly set principles and criteria areas are selected and verified. Only the best protected areas with natural ecological processes are admitted to the PAN Parks network. For example, the area has to be at least 20,000 ha in size, and legally protected at the long term. Visitors are to expect a high quality of provi-

sions to experience nature, for example a visitor centre. Other areas are also stimulated this way to raise their standard, thus improve conservation, as well as develop sustainable tourism.

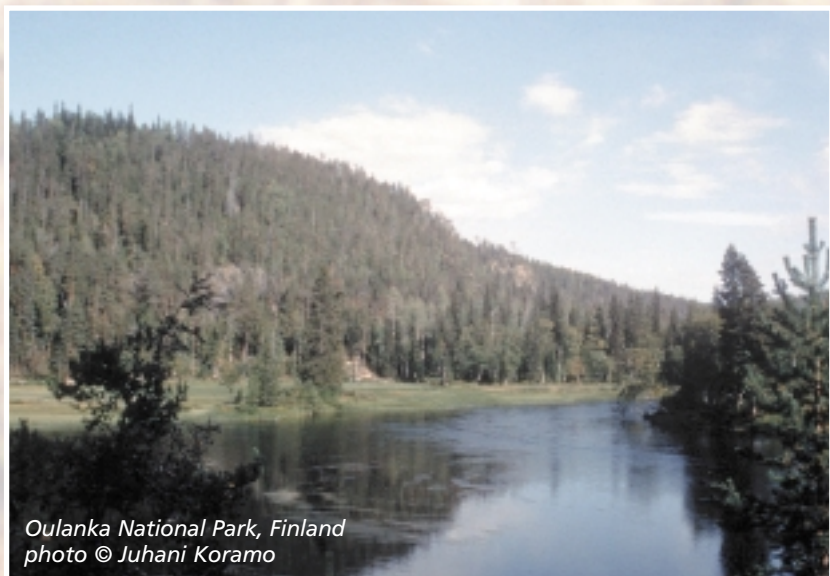
Based on these criteria, three PAN Parks have applied to be the first parks to stand verification. At the moment a process of verification against the PAN Parks Principles and Criteria is ongoing in the following parks; Bieszczady National Park in south-east Poland, Oulanka National Park in Finland and Fulufjället National Park in Sweden.

If all goes as expected, the official opening of Fulufjället as a National Park and as PAN Park, will take place 17 September, when His Majesty King Carl Gustav of Sweden will deliver the certificates to the three parks. The official establishment of the first three PAN Parks will then be a reality.

For more information please contact Joep van de Vlasakker, PAN Parks coordinator Western Europe, c/o Flaxfield Nature Consultancy: flaxfield@skynet.be or visit: www.panparks.org

Calendar

- 5th International Moose Symposium, Hafjell, Norway, from 4 - 9 August 2002
- 3rd European conference on restoration ecology, 25-31 August 2002, Budapest, Hungary
- official opening first three PAN-Parks, 17 September 2002, Fulufjällets National Park, Sweden
- Polish annual theriological conference, 19-20 September 2002, Krakow, Poland
- 4th International Wild Boar Symposium, 19-22 September 2002, Lousa, Portugal
- 6th LHI Coordination group (plenary) meeting, 20-25 September 2002, Siauliai, Lithuania
- 4th International mouflon symposium, 10 - 12 October 2002, Nuoro (Sardinia), Italy



Oulanka National Park, Finland
photo © Juhani Koramo



THE OTHER SIDE [Full Name: Linas Balciauskas] [Birth Place: Birzai, Lithuania] [Birthdate: 30.04.1957]

A risky experience

Linas is a new and very welcome asset to the LHI Core Group. At the last meeting in Germany he not only showed his phenomenal knowledge of bison, but also his great story telling capacity. Of which you can experience some below.



Lithuanian Linas
photo © Fred Baerselman

Red data book and becomes a big game. I am also teaching, at the moment in two Lithuanian universities. This all happened without any special efforts. Maybe, I reached a threshold to start giving, not only getting?"

The Browser: Do you remember your first encounter with a bison, in the wild or otherwise?

"Oh, yes, I do. I was a twelve-year old boy, when my father took me to a new bison breeding station where the first European bison had arrived from Russia. I sat upright on the fence, looking. They seemed so monumental, powerful, but, believe me, so sluggish. I decided, that they are like cows, and kept this image in my mind until the second encounter when I was a student working on bison. Quite enthusiastically I climbed the fence of the station to look after a bison calf. To cut a long story short; I was attacked by the mother and ran away. While running I learned that bison are not sluggish at all. I tripped over a branch and tumbled, feeling saliva of a bison on my hand. She stopped, turned around and went back to her calf. On the right side

of the fence it was only then that my hands started trembling so badly, that I was not able to use matches... From that moment I started to know them as interesting animals."

The Browser: Mention three reasons why you appreciate working with bison. Why is it a special animal for you?

"Bison is a part of Lithuanian history and culture, which means that it should, no, it must be restored in the wild. If I can put a hand on this, this single reason is enough to keep me going. Also, restoration of a species is always an international process and thus Lithuania should participate. But maybe above all, my sign is an ox, isn't this enough to see bison as a personal animal?"



Lithuanian bison
photo © Fred Baerselman

The Browser: Work...

"My entire scientific career was and is within an ecological institute. Here I did my PhD on hoofed animal ecology in man-made landscape conditions. At the moment I am leading a laboratory, which works on biological diversity, species of European interest and started to work on human dimensions. When speaking about European bison; I have a very nice vision of the animal, raising in numbers and spreading across the country, until it is drawn out of the

COMMUNI-ACTION

Never let the facts spoil a good story

11 June was an important day for Polish LHI member Kajetan Perzanowski and in particular for the three bulls and one European bison cow that were released in Ciszansko-Wetlinski Landscape Park.

This introduction was given good coverage in various media. National and local television and written media reported on the event. Since nothing comes for granted, Kajetan Perzanowski shares his experiences with us on getting the press to write what it was all about.

"Being frank, it is just a lot of hassle. I was continuously pestered to allow them to film everything, so at the very end I gave up. Anyway, whatever they could mix up they did. Mostly they were disappointed that nothing went wrong (no animal died, nobody got trampled, no expensive equipment was lost).

I was constantly asked what problems we were experiencing with the project, and what problems I expect in the future, while the whole exerci-



Bison release ceremony by Kajetan Perzanowski
photo © Matthieu Barreteau

se was actually a great success. All together, the positive aspect is, that appearance in the media gives a much better recognition and appreciation of our institution, the project and myself, especially within local communities and authorities. That is helpful, we can build on this. But after such events I am completely losing confidence in the accuracy of anything I see on television or read in a newspaper (except for the results of football games)."

LIFE STOCK

Future perspective for Apennine chamois



In the Holocene the Apennine subspecies of chamois *Rupicapra pyrenaica ornata* ranged in Central-South Italy, from the Sibillini mountains (Marche Region) to the Pollino massif (Calabria Region). More recently, its presence has been confirmed in the Gran Sasso massif, where the last chamois was shot in 1982, and in a neighbouring mountain area, the Abruzzo National Park. Numbers remained low all through the last centuries, down to just few tens of individuals during World Wars I and II. A report by Sandro Lovari and Franco Mari

Apennine chamois in Gran Sasso
photo © Piero Papa

Around 1991, the distribution of the Apennine chamois was limited to a narrow area in the Abruzzo National Park (about 450 animals). In the 1990s reintroduction projects created two small populations in Gran Sasso Laga National Park and Majella National Park. To reduce the impact of small numbers with a low genetic variability and conflicting interactions with livestock, several initiatives were carried out since this reintroduction. The most important ones were the classification of the Central Apennine region as a LHI-hot spot, the publication of the Apennine Chamois Action Plan by the Italian Ministry of Environment and the creation of

the LHI Chamois Working Group to support the conservation of chamois populations.

EU Life programme

A three year EU-Life programme has just finished, with the scientific support of Siena University, at the Gran Sasso Laga National Park. At present, a new three year EU-Life programme is starting in three National Parks (Gran Sasso Laga, Majella, Sibillini): a coordinated management of the Majella and Gran Sasso wild chamois population (100 and 110 animals respectively), a captive breeding programme and the reintroduction to the Sibillini area.

EDITORIAL

From the coordinators desk

April 18, 2002, should have become a memorable day for the Large Herbivore Initiative. Twenty Konik horses were ready to start a new life in the Orlovskoje Polesie National Park in Russia. The actual transportation from their home base, the Lauwersmeer in The Netherlands, to Russia was the final step to be taken. Months of negotiation time, faxes, phone calls, emails and personal visits solved all existing problems. A written approval was even received from the Russian authorities, one week before the departure of the transport.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of all people and organisations involved -WWF Russia, the Dutch Embassy in Moscow, WWF Netherlands, Dutch and Russian veterinarians, travel agents etc.- a new hurdle turned up and proved to be real and definite. Despite the presence of a Russian veterinarian in The Netherlands, the Russian authorities demanded another veterinarian, sent from Moscow, to be present during the whole period of quarantine. A period that officially lasts for 21 days, while all the required tests had been done and only three days were left before departure of the horses.

To cut a long story short, this new requirement -having received written approval or not- could not possibly be met. The disappointment was immense. Now, some three months later, the Large Herbivore Initiative is building upon the lessons learned from this 'conservation set-back' where 20 horses were meant to pick up on the ecological-functional role of their extinct ancestor, the tarpan horse. New initiatives are underway, together with our Russian colleagues and partners, which in the end will hopefully lead to a successful introduction of this beautiful animal in the Orlovskoje Polesie National Park.

Fred Baerselman

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