CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

The Last Wild Horse: The Return of the Takhi

This feature depicts the emotional reintroduction of takhi to their last known home range in Mongolia's Gobi desert. The takhi, also known as Przewalski's horse, is the last surviving horse species that has never been domesticated. An important national symbol for Mongolians, the takhi also serves as an important case study for conservation biologists who struggle to support the viability of thousands of species on the verge of extinction.

CLASS DISCUSSION

Establish Prior Knowledge

Call on students to share what they know about zoos and other institutions that are breeding endangered animals with the goal of returning them to the wild. Discuss what problems might be encountered in returning animals to the wild.

Exploration

Have students watch the feature and read the essay, "The Wild Horse Returns to Mongolia." Use the following questions to guide a class discussion.

- What caused the takhi to become extinct in the wild?
  (Answers include: Hunting, loss of habitat)
- What challenges did scientists face in breeding takhi for their return to the wild?
  (Answers may include: The takhi were bred in captivity for 12-14 generations, making their offspring susceptible to problems caused by inbreeding.)
- How did scientists prepare the horses for reintroduction to the wild?
  (Answers may include: Herds were established on small reserves where the horses formed social bonds and learned to find their own food.)
- In 1990 many of the released takhi died due to disease, severe weather conditions, an inability to adjust to the climate, and predators. How did scientists cope with these problems?
  (Answers may include: Scientists choose only the healthiest horses to reintroduce to the wild. Newly introduced takhi received supplementary hay and pellets and many received water during extreme droughts.)
- How do scientists monitor the horses?
  (Answers may include: Scientists monitor the horses each day either by direct observation or by radio telemetry—some horses in each family group wear radio collars.)
- Based on their data and on computer models, what do scientists hypothesize about the takhis' chances of surviving in the wild?
  (Answers may include: In 2007 there were 115 takhis roaming free, 76 of which were born in the wild. Computer models suggest that groups of 100 free-ranging horses is a viable population. Scientists hypothesize that a group this size will be resilient to disease and other catastrophes.)

Wrap-Up

Use these questions to wrap up your discussion.

- Do you think breeding programs are the answer to saving endangered species? Why or why not?
  (Answers will vary. Students should be able to support their answers.)