

# **The Large Herbivore Initiative: An Eurasian conservation and restoration programme for a key species group in ecosystems (Europe, Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia)**

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## **Abstract**

A description is given of the programme of the WWF-founded Large Herbivore Initiative (LHI). The LHI is a network organization, for which the WWF acts as facilitator. In the programme large herbivores are considered not just as species as such, but also as essential elements in ecosystems and thus as promoters of ecosystem conservation.

The scope, motivations, objectives, activities and projects of the programme are discussed. Some examples from Mongolia are given to illustrate the programme.

## **1 Introduction**

The Large Herbivore Initiative (LHI) was founded in 1998 by WWF International under the European Programme (Europe and North and Central Asia) at a meeting and programme planning workshop with some 50 international experts in Bialowieza (Poland). The idea was inspired by the success of the Large Carnivore Initiative (for Europe) (LCIE), which was founded in 1995 to put the large carnivores of Europe back on the map. Large mammals can serve as promoters of nature conservation, as had been experienced by WWF, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia.

The large herbivores are special in a way, since they are considered a group of key species in ecosystems, having a major impact on vegetation structure and composition, and hence on the biological appearance of the landscape. So the LHI was not just to target large herbivore species, but was to have several targets using the large herbivore species as 'flagship' species. These include the functional ecosystem approach and the key role large herbivores play, and the role of these species as models to develop criteria and principles for the establishment of ecological networks. Furthermore, just as with the LCIE, the idea was not just to have a new WWF Programme, but to create a network of international experts and interested parties that would be able to operate more or less independently of the WWF. The role of the WWF was to act as a catalyst; to bring people together, provide basic logistics and coordination capacity and provide basic funding, also as seed capital to start key projects and organize cooperation.

Contrary to the LCIE, it was decided not just to focus on Europe, but to expand the geographical scope of the LHI to cover most of Eurasia (except for the tropical zone). This was considered to be more in line with the original / potential range of large herbivore species of Northern and (Central) temperate Eurasia and would mean that some of the 'forgotten' large herbivore species of the east would get coordinated conservation attention.

## **2 Need for initiative and coordination**

There are several reasons why a specific initiative for large herbivores was considered necessary.

### **2.1 Endangered species and populations**

Many of the 'exotic' and 'forgotten' species of large herbivores in Central and Eastern Asia are endangered. This is true for most of the species of wild sheep and goats, like the Argali (*Ovis ammon*). The wild Bactrian camel (*Camelus bactrianus*), Bukhara deer (*Cervus elaphus bactrianus*), Musk deer (*Moschus chrysogaster* and *M. moschiferus*), Kulan (*Equus onager*, a wild ass), (Mongolian) saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*) and Mongolian gazelle (*Procapra gutturosa*) are other species that are either already critically endangered as species, or of which (sub-)populations are under severe threat.

Not just these 'exotics' are endangered, but also a species like the European bison (*Bison bonasus*) is still considered endangered, since there is only a limited number living free-ranging in the wild, and in particular because the genetic base of the species is very narrow, requiring expert management for breeding and reintroduction programmes to restore the species successfully in European habitats.

The same goes for (some of) the sub-species of mountain ungulates, such as Ibex wild goats (*Capra spec.*) and chamois (*Rupicapra spec.*). Even for 'common' European large herbivore species like the red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) it can be argued that these are becoming endangered, because of increasing fragmentation and genetic isolation, especially in Western Europe (see Fig. 1).

### **2.2 Fragmented habitats and isolation**

Fragmented habitats and isolation are not just increasing problems in Western Europe, but also a major threat all over the Eurasian geographical range of the LHI.