

Briefly

SPOTLIGHT ON UNGULATES

Rhinoceros poaching reaches new highs in South Africa

Within the first 2 weeks of December 2021, poachers in South Africa had killed 24 rhinoceroses, following a quieter period earlier in the COVID-19 pandemic. Rhinoceros carcasses were found in four provinces, with seven individuals dead in Kruger National Park, six in KwaZulu-Natal, and seven in Mpumalanga. Four more rhinoceroses, including a pregnant female, were found at a game reserve. A fifth individual in this location had a gunshot wound but was still alive, and was taken into care. Nine people have been arrested for the rhinoceros killings, but there could be more poachers involved. The number of rhinoceroses poached has increased significantly, fueled by rising demand for rhinoceros horns in Asia, and poverty in rural African communities. By weight, the horn is now more valuable than gold. In 2020, 394 rhinoceroses were poached for their horn despite the restrictions imposed by the pandemic lockdown. This new wave of poaching highlights the devastating consequences of the rhinoceros horn trade.

Source: *One Green Planet* (2021)

onegreenplanet.org/animalsandnature/south-africa-rhino-poaching-reaches-new-highs

Yucatán becomes location of the first tapir sanctuary in Mexico

Yucatán has become the headquarters of the first sanctuary for tapirs in Mexico. The new sanctuary aims to breed this unique mammal in a protected and controlled environment, and eventually return captive-bred individuals to the wild. To achieve this goal, the Mexican environmentalist Arturo Islas Allende has signed an agreement with Auto Safari Chapín de Guatemala, the most important tapir sanctuary globally. The sanctuary in Mexico's neighbouring Guatemala will provide tapir pairs that will be relocated to establish the Mexican breeding population. Captive breeding is deemed necessary in Mexico to support the decreasing wild populations. Tapirs are relatively slow to mature and have low reproductive rates: females can reproduce from c. 3 years of age, and then only produce a single calf every 2 years.

Source: *Yucatan Times* (2021)

theyucantimes.com/2021/12/yucatan-will-have-the-first-tapir-sanctuary-in-all-of-mexico

Second herd of kulan arrives in the Ukrainian Danube Delta

A herd of 20 kulan, also known as the Asiatic wild ass, has arrived on the Tarutino Steppe in the Danube Delta landscape restoration area in south-west Ukraine. This is the second group of kulan to arrive in the area; the first individuals were brought there in May 2020. The new herd was first kept in a 31-ha enclosure to acclimatize before being released on the steppe, as part of a long-term reintroduction programme that aims to establish a free-roaming herd of 250–300 individuals in the Danube Delta region by 2035. The animals will fill an important ecological niche, enhancing habitats for wildlife and boosting the local economy through tourism. Their grazing will keep grass short, benefitting animals such as ground squirrels and steppe marmots and mitigating wildfire risk by reducing excess vegetation. The kulan will also form an additional prey base for predators such as wolves. All the kulan involved in the programme will be sourced from the Askania-Nova Biosphere Reserve in southern Ukraine, where a small herd was brought from Turkmenistan in 1950. Source: *Endangered Landscapes Programme* (2022) endangeredlandscapes.org/second-herd-of-kulan-arrives-in-the-ukrainian-danube-delta

Tweaked fences are helping to save Alberta's pronghorn

The Alberta Fish and Game Association and the Alberta Conservation Association have wrapped up another season of their Pronghorn Corridor Enhancement Project, with changes to fencing that help pronghorns stay healthier and less vulnerable to predators. Pronghorns were once abundant across the grasslands of North America, but came close to extinction until large sections of their habitats were protected by conservation efforts. In Canada, they can now be found in south-western Saskatchewan and south-eastern Alberta. Pronghorns are the second-fastest land animal in the world, but they are not good at leaping the fences that now crisscross the prairies, preferring to travel under them. When pronghorns squeeze under fences, they can lose hair, which in the winter can lead to disease and frostbite. The two conservation groups decided to find a way to help. They have been working with landowners to replace the bottom strands of barbed wire fences with smooth wire and raise them up by 46 cm. Together, the two groups have adjusted c. 560 km of fencing on public and private land since 2009.

Source: *CBC News* (2021) cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/pronghorn-fence-alberta-conservation-1.6298645

Rare antelope population booming in Chinese nature reserve

The population of a rare species of antelope, Przewalski's gazelle *Procapra przewalskii*, has surpassed 2,700 in Qinghai Lake National Nature Reserve, in Qinghai Province in north-west China, according to the Reserve's administration. The population comprised only 300 individuals in 1994. Przewalski's gazelles are mainly distributed in the Qinghai Lake Basin in Haiyan, Gangcha, Tianjun and Gonghe Counties. The species is under first-class national protection in China and is categorized as Endangered on the IUCN Red List. Located in the north-east of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, Qinghai Lake is China's largest inland saltwater lake. It is also referred to as the gene bank of the plateau for its rich biodiversity. The Przewalski's gazelle population in the Reserve is closely monitored and managed, particularly during the breeding season from November to January, when rams fight for access to ewes. Injured rams are treated by Reserve staff, and supplementary food is provided for the herds to support their conservation.

Sources: *China Global Television Network* (2022) news.cgtn.com/news/2022-01-02/Rare-antelope-population-booming-in-China-s-natural-reserve-16uFuq43E64/index.html & *China News* (2021) chinanews.com.cn/sh/shipin/cns/2021/12-23/news91159.shtml

Scientists step up search for so-called Asian unicorn

Weighing up to 100 kg and sporting long straight horns and white spots on its face, the saola does not sound like an animal that would be difficult to spot. But this elusive creature, nicknamed the 'Asian unicorn', was only discovered in 1992; the first large mammal new to science in > 50 years. Since then, the population is believed to have declined massively because of poaching. The species is categorized as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List, and in 2006 a programme was initiated to find the last saolas in the wild for a captive breeding programme and future reintroduction to the wild. However, even intensive camera trapping during 2017–2019 failed to detect the saola, and efforts need to be increased to find it. A new initiative will train dogs to detect saola signs such as dung, with samples then to be studied on site using saola-specific DNA field test kits. Should the kits return a positive result, expert wildlife trackers will start searching for saola in the forest and try to secure individuals for captive breeding.

Source: *The Guardian* (2022) theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/07/scientists-step-up-hunt-for-asian-unicorn-one-of-worlds-rarest-animals-aoe