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His Excellency, Minister U. Barsbold
Ministry of Nature and Environment
Government Building 3
Baga Toiruu 44
Ulaanbaatar 11
Mongolia

Your Excellency,

Re: International Concerns, Gobi Bear Conservation Plan

The International Association for Bear Research and Management (IBA) very much appreciates the concern and efforts by both you and the Government of Mongolia on behalf of the endangered Gobi Bear. We are well aware that your government's Mongolian Action Programme links protection of the environment to the long-term security of the country, is dedicated to sustaining viable populations of rare wildlife as a national and international treasure, and recognizes the Gobi Bear as a crucial link in this effort.

IBA is a professional organization committed to science-based conservation and restoration of the world's bears through research, population and habitat management and education. Our membership of over 600 bear specialists from 50 countries conducts research studies and conservation management on all 8 bear species that exist today. The EU, USA, Canadian and other national or regional governments have used our expertise and advice to address bear conservation problems. Similarly, if IBA can be of assistance to your government by participating in an effort to develop a science-based strategy to gain the support and assistance necessary to conserve this internationally significant species, we would be very willing to offer our assistance.

Like you, we are very concerned that the remaining Gobi bear population is slipping closer toward extinction. Because the biology, behavior, and use of resources by bears differs substantially from that of hoofed animals, especially given the environment in which they exist, application of measures that are appropriate for saving hoofed animals from extinction could well have a disastrous effects for Gobi bears.

We are aware that plans are being considered to place the remaining Gobi bears in captivity in hopes of increasing population numbers and avoiding extinction. We feel it is very important that all implications of such a move should be carefully explored prior to beginning it. Any programme to maintain wildlife in captivity requires substantial monetary costs. It must also address logistical and biological problems associated with

maintaining the behavioral traits and ability to exploit available habitat that are necessary to their recovery as wild animals.

These considerations will be especially true for the Gobi bear. Costs for care may be high. Individual bears require large areas to survive in the wild—they may similarly require large enclosures of appropriate habitat while in captivity. To mimic conditions in the wild, these enclosures may have to be built to exclude other captive bears that are not family members, except during the breeding season. Similarly bears will require the same very specialized diets available in the Gobi if they are to be effectively released into the wild at a later date. A large staff would be necessary, including veterinarians, animal keepers, and maintenance personnel to adequately provide for the care and security of the bears. Also, because bears may live up 30 years, a long-term commitment of funds to support a large facility would be important.

Simply bringing this small population into captivity may pose risks to individual survival that will be difficult to justify given the small numbers presently exist. Once taken into captivity, any subsequent offspring or generations could lose just those characteristics that make them able to live in the environmental conditions of the Gobi.

When bears become familiar with the presence of human scent while in captivity, they usually lose their natural fear of humans upon release. This can result in re-introduced bears approaching human settlements in search of food, sometimes killing livestock or even rarely causing human injury. Bears exhibiting any of these behaviors are usually killed. Therefore taking bears into captivity to improve survival can have just the opposite effect of saving them from extinction.

To avoid any of these potential problems and to make certain that the best science and applied experience available is brought to Gobi bear conservation, we encourage you to consider convening a meeting this fall to include Government of Mongolia wildlife experts and policy-makers and international experts in bear conservation. We remain supportive of a meeting as proposed in a 31 March letter to you signed by 16 international scientific/conservation organizations, including IBA.

We suggest that this meeting would allow discussions leading to worldwide support for efforts to address the plight of the Gobi bear. Outcomes of the meeting would not only further worldwide recognition of the problem but would result in a carefully considered and widely supported conservation plan important to funding the effort. Certainly, efforts to fund conservation actions are more likely when they are developed by national governments with the assistance of international specialists.

We share your deep concern for the conservation of the Gobi bear. We urge you to consider convening a meeting this fall/early winter to assess the problems and potential solutions that will best address the tenets of the Mongolian Action Programme and ensure a secure future for the Gobi bear. We would be pleased to participate in such an important meeting at our expense.

Very sincerely yours,

Harry V. Reynolds
President
International Association for Bear Research and Management

cc: Altangerel Enkhbat