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The mission of the Center for Russian Nature Conservation (CRNC) is to promote the conservation of nature in Russia and throughout the former Soviet Union, and to assist conservation groups in that region through information exchange, coordination of professional and education exchanges, and provision of technical assistance to protected areas. CRNC is a project of the Tides Center.



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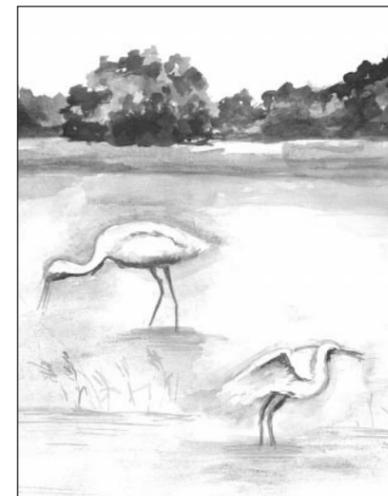
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ON THE COVER



Kulan (*Equus hemionus*)
Cover drawing by V. Gorbатов

Voice from the Wild (A letter from the Editor)

Throughout his life, the 19th-century Russian-Ukrainian writer Nikolai Gogol never lost his wonder at the expansive steppes that covered his native land. At every hour and season they were different, a perpetually changing canvas of colors and sounds carried on the wind. Nearly two centuries later, few of us have seen the steppes as he did: the spread of agriculture and industry across central Eurasia has eliminated much of the wide band of grassland that once stretched from Eastern Europe through Kazakhstan and even beyond Lake Baikal. But in this issue of Russian Conservation News, we invite you to explore these unique ecosystems in all their vastness, examining both the history of their destruction and scientists' hopes for their restoration. Then travel to the steppes of Kalmykia on the northwestern shore of the Caspian Sea, the last remaining habitat in Europe of the saiga antelope. For centuries, the fortunes of this resilient mammal have risen and fallen like the waves of grass that cover the steppe, ever following the currents of Russian history in the fate of its habitat and the people who share it.

We also turn our attention to the tiny musk deer, whose valuable musk glands have made it the prize of many a poacher in the Far Eastern region of Russia and brought one subspecies near the brink of extinction. Though musk deer are difficult to raise in captivity, years of careful observation and experimentation may have finally proposed solutions that could offer impoverished Siberian villages the opportunity to earn a living by raising the deer instead of hunting it.

Indeed, the complicated relationships between people and nature take center stage in this issue of RCN as we study the future of the Volga delta region. Just kilometers away from the steppes of Kalmykia, Europe's longest river spreads into a fan of rivers and streams at the edge of the Caspian Sea. A wetland with great importance for conservation of many fish and birds, the delta is also home to a small but significant human population and several industries with competing demands on natural resources. Astrakhansky Zapovednik, one of the oldest nature reserves in Russia and also a UNESCO biosphere reserve, has recently taken the lead in creating a forum for these multiple stakeholders to practice cooperative management of natural resources. Russian Conservation News offers an in-depth look at some of the challenges and opportunities the region faces on the road to sustainable development.

In many ways, the project in the Volga delta is a sign of a relatively new trend in Russia: even twenty years ago, local determination of environmental management was impossible in the face of central planning and a command economy. But the breakup of the Soviet Union a decade ago brought a completely new palette of problems and tools to nature conservation as each newly independent republic began to forge its own environmental policy. In this issue of RCN, we examine the development of nature conservation in Ukraine since independence in 1991. Bearing in mind Ukraine's unique cultural landscapes, local conservationists are learning to work with government officials and international organizations to expand the network of protected areas and clean up the pollution and poor environmental management of the nation's Soviet inheritance.

We invite you to begin your journey with a tour of what may be the oldest example of conscientious environmental management: the botanical garden. For centuries, gardens and arboreta have brought together the creativity of the human mind and the beauty and abundance of nature. In Russia, a network of botanical gardens that stretches throughout the country provides an oasis of nature to city dwellers, and for many, their first introduction conservation ideals.