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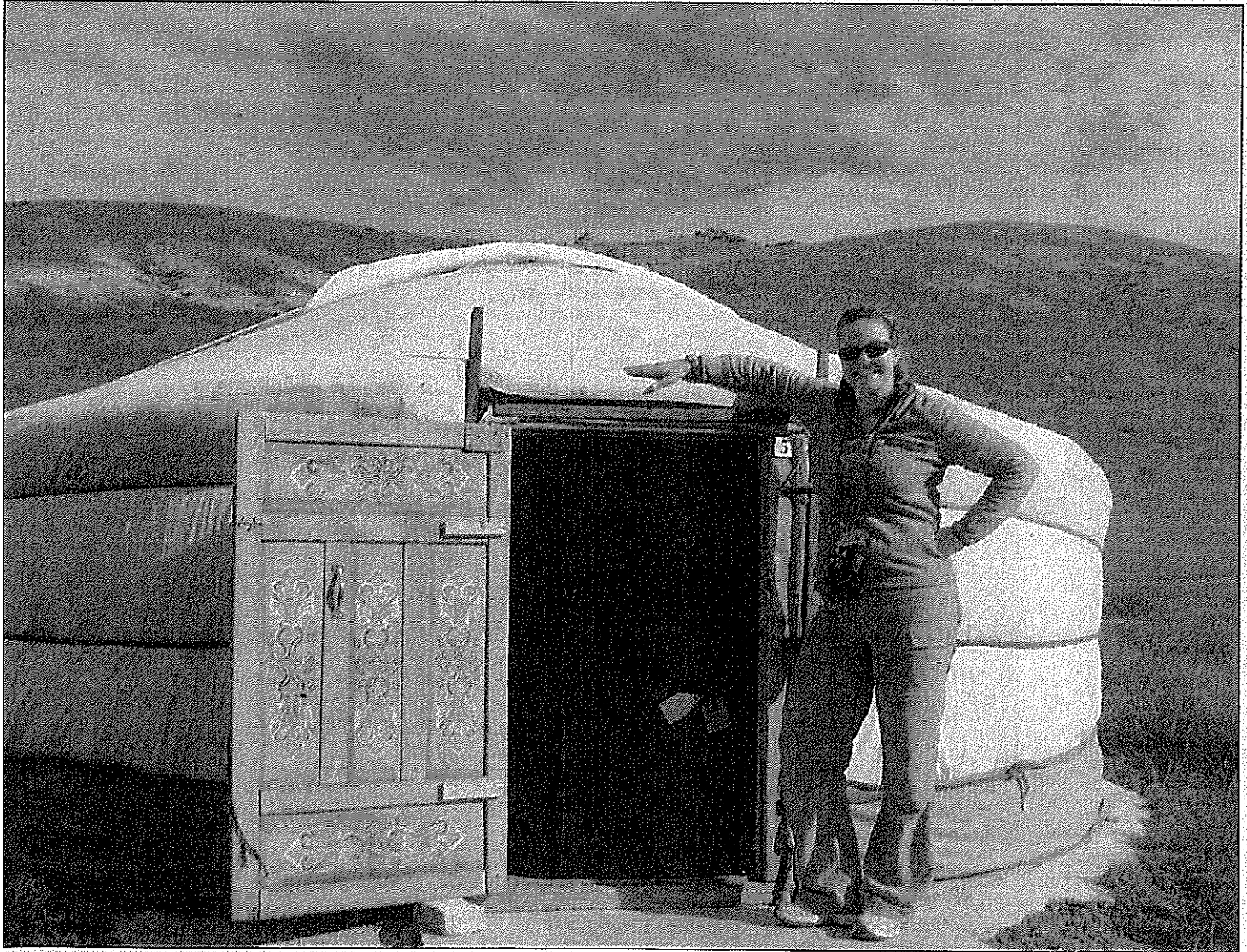
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Veronica Balogh, a teacher at Visintainer Middle School in Brunswick, recently traveled to Mongolia as part of a master's program through Project Dragonfly. Here, Balogh stands next to a ger, a round portable housing unit at Molit Camp in Hustai National Park.

Visintainer Middle School teacher treks to Mongolia

Expedition enhances conservation, teaching skills

Katherine Fulton
Special to The Gazette

When Visintainer Middle School teacher Veronica Balogh first arrived in Mongolia, she didn't know what to expect.

Then again, that's part of why she had enrolled in a master's degree program through Project Dragonfly, an educational project founded by Miami University and supported by the National Science Foundation.

Balogh knew her degree should be about more than enhancing her academic credentials, and after teaching science and social studies at the Brunswick school for two years, she wanted to find a way to help her students gain real world knowledge about conservation issues and world cultures.

It wasn't just a matter of education, says Balogh, but helping her students become engaged learners both in and out of the classroom. After returning from her journey in June, she can't wait to tell her students about her trip — and tell fellow educators about how her involvement with Project Dragonfly and its Earth Expeditions program has changed her approach to education.

"This is a beneficial program to me as a master's student, and also to my students, where things that I'm studying and learning are getting directly translated into the classroom as activities and as a



A Pallas's Cat in Mongolia.

learning style and process. I think that's really important," Balogh said. "My school and administrator, Carol Yost, has been very supportive of the traveling and the transition of what I want to use in the classroom. I really appreciate that. I'm really excited to share this with my students, and I hope that they benefit from it as well as I have and use it as a window into the world."

From Medina County to Mongolia

As a member of the inaugural class of the Project Dragonfly Global Field Master's Program, Balogh was only one of 150 educators to be accepted.

Before embarking on the traveling portion of the course, students take Web-based classes and

ABOUT PROJECT DRAGONFLY

Project Dragonfly offers master's programs and various workshops with a focus on science and conservation throughout the world.

Though this was Balogh's first trip to Mongolia, it was not her first time abroad on a Project Dragonfly Earth Expedition. Last year, she spent time in Thailand to study how Buddhism affects conservation efforts in the Southeast Asian nation. While there, she spent time at a national park, then lived for a bit at a Buddhist monastery where she observed Morning Prayer ceremonies and the monks' alms walk. The trip was very different from Mongolia in many ways, but did have some common threads.

"I always feel so westernized when I go places," Balogh said. "The people in Mongolia and Thailand speak English fairly well. You don't know any Mongolian, you don't know anything really about their language, and here they're gracious enough to do their best to communicate with you. It's difficult for them, and we're really blessed that they're willing to work with us, because we know so little."

For more information about Project Dragonfly, visit www.projectdragonfly.org.

— Katherine Fulton

study materials pertaining to what they will be observing while abroad. In Balogh's case, it involved learning about the Pallas's Cat and the Przewalski's Horse. Mongolia also corresponded well with her class curriculum.

"I chose to go to Mongolia," Balogh said. "It was really interesting because I teach science and social studies, so I try to really work in the social studies aspect because we get so immersed in the culture and the people there. It's really interesting to bring back to the kids. One of the things we study in seventh-grade social studies is ancient civilizations — we talk about the Mongol invasions

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MONGOLIA

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and the expansion in Asia and into China. It was really neat to be able to experience that nomadic lifestyle, and I really think it will help the kids to understand better when they see pictures of the kind of housing that they use. It's very similar to what they had a thousand years ago."

The group traveled together to Mongolia, where there were two main sites.

Balogh's class of 20 started at the Pallas's Cat research site, then traveled to Hustai National Park for the second half of the trip.

"We lived in the gers, which are round, portable housing used in the nomadic lifestyle," Balogh said. "The Mongolian people who were working with us were very welcoming and embraced us into their own culture."

Hustai National Park is the home of the Przewalski's Horse, also known as the Takhi.

Once extinct in the wild, the animal became the subject of a highly successful re-introduction program starting in 1996.

As part of her research, Balogh spent time in the field observing the horses, as well as learning about the program that

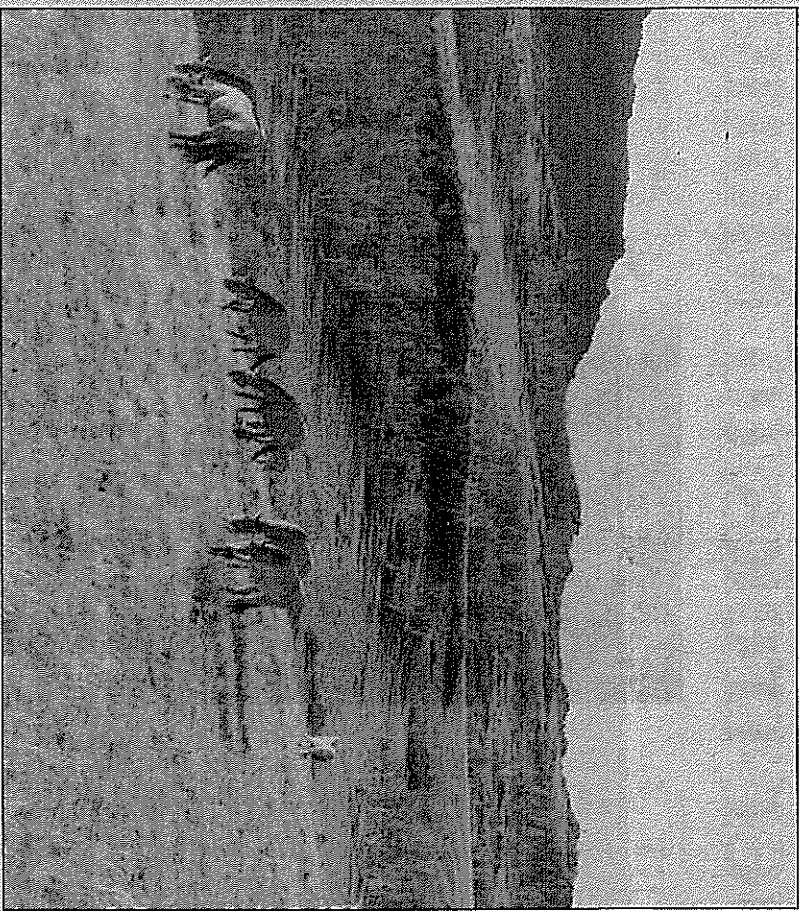


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A group of Przewalski's Horses graze in Mongolia.

brought them back to the wild.

She attributes the success of the program to its pre-planning and methodology, such as gradually re-introducing the horses and doing so in areas of the

park where there were fewer predators.

Not all of Balogh's experiences took place in the field. Looking back on her trip, one of the things she remembers most

fondly is the time she spent with Mongolian children, who were involved in putting together a show to air on Mongolian radio.

"The kids were in charge of

deciding what conservation problem they wanted to bring to the attention of Mongolians," Balogh said. "The girl that we were working with decided that mining was becoming a big problem — there was a lot of pollution and land being destroyed by strip mining. Just to see her passion for that cause, and how it was affecting her, her family and her community was really moving, and really showed her awareness, and I thought that was really important."

One of the things we did to get to know the kids a little bit better was to make kites. We decorated the kites with the kids in our group, and then we went out and flew the kites. It was so neat to see this big, blue sky and this vast green land, and all of these kites. We decorated the kites with our favorite things about nature, and it was kind of neat to see this common understanding and this common understanding and a common love for nature and our world."

Teacher and student

With the end of summer rapidly approaching, Balogh can't wait to get back to the classroom to share her experiences with her students.

She says she thinks her experiences will help her students in a number of ways,

from seeing conservation on a global level to exploring a new culture with someone who has lived it first hand.

It will also give them valuable skills in making inquiry-based decisions and taking ownership of their learning.

It is Balogh's hope that more educators are able to take advantage of the unique opportunities provided by Project Dragonfly to enhance their worldview and enrich their classrooms.

"I think the important thing about Earth Expeditions is getting together like-minded educators to foster an understanding of conservation and inquiry in this particular setting."

"We may use specific species and their conservation efforts to focus on that, but I think the big overall picture is encouraging conservation and exploration. We've observed these animals and experienced this culture — how can we convert this to what we do every day in our classrooms? It might not make a lot of sense for my students to spend a month studying the Pallas's Cats, but how can I use those methods in my classroom at home?"

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