

The Animals of the Nomads

Directions: Read the descriptions of the animals noted below. Answer the questions that follow, discussing your responses with the other members of your group. You will be asked to share these answers with the whole class.

Horses

The horse is often the animal most beloved by the nomadic people. The horses of Central Asia have been known for their stamina, strength, speed, and endurance since ancient times. They are adapted to the extremes of weather and terrain of this region, making them valuable forms of transportation. The mane and tail are used for making rope, weaving, and even musical instruments. Horses are not generally raised for food or hides, though they may be utilized for meat or leather. The milk of mares is made into a fermented beverage by some groups of nomadic herdsman. The famous horses of Ferghana were especially valued and used as tribute to the Chinese emperors. It was on the small and seemingly tireless Mongolian ponies that the Khans began their quest across the continent to establish the Mongol Empire.

Sheep

The staple livestock of the nomadic people, sheep are valued for their milk (used to make dairy products) and mutton (a basic part of their diet). The sheep's wool adapts it to the environment and is used for felt, carpets, and clothing. The hide is also valued for leather products. Sheep require protection from predators, as well as fresh pasturelands.

Goats

The goat is valued by Central Asian nomads for their meat, milk, hide, and particularly wool. As with sheep, these products are important in providing food, clothing, and products to sell. In some areas of Central Asia the production of cashmere has become an especially profitable product of this animal. These animals are also adapted to the mountainous terrain of Central Asia.

Camels

The sturdy, steady camel is an important livestock commodity as transportation. In an arid region, this animal can survive for up to a month without fresh water. The camel is especially helpful as a beast of burden in the desert areas, with hoofs, hides, and eyes particularly adapted to this environment. In addition, the milk, meat, and wool of camels are also important to the people who raise them. It was the domestication of the camel that made travel along the Silk Road possible for the purposes of trade.

Bovines (Cows/Yak/Ox)

The shaggy yak is the animal of high altitudes. Cross breeding with cattle has produced a domestic ox that is a valued animal in parts of Central Asia. The domestic yak of today provides milk and meat, which is consumed fresh or dried. Hides are used for leather, and hair is used for rope and cloth. The yak is also utilized as a beast of burden and transportation as they are well adapted for their high altitude environment, much as camels are used in the desert. The less sturdy cow is found in flatter elevations and used for milk, meat, and leather, though not as pack animals.

Dogs

The only non-livestock animal that is frequently found among the nomadic people of Central Asia, the dog is used to guard livestock and property. Dogs keep predators such as wolves at bay and may be used for hunting. They are not considered pets, though they are admired for their loyalty and valued for their courage.

Animals of the Nomads—Questions

Assigned Animal: _____

1. Where are you likely to see this animal in our culture? Why?
2. How frequently do you see this animal? In what numbers?
3. What is this animal valued for in our culture? How is it utilized?
4. What qualities would we use to describe this animal?
5. Has the use of this animal changed through our history? Why?
6. Why might this animal be especially valuable to a nomadic pastoralist?