

# **Ghosts of the mountains: the role of wildlife conservation in sustainable tourism – a case study of snow leopard conservation and sustainable tourism in Mongolia**

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## **Abstract**

Mongolia is currently home to 500–1,000 of the estimated 3,500–7,000, approximately one quarter, of snow leopards left in the wild, according to the most recent figures from the Snow Leopard Trust and the Wildlife Conservation Society. Through on-site research and interviews with in-country nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and government officials, the paper will question whether current sustainable tourism in Mongolia has been supported or deterred by efforts in snow leopard conservation.

Snow leopards, often called the “Ghosts of the Mountains”, are rarely seen by tourists to Central Asia. Still, few who travel to Mongolia are unaware of their endangered status. The snow leopards’ rarity and endangered species status has been highly publicized, with snow leopards often central to conservation groups’ public campaigns. Thus, the paper will question what impact sustainable tourism has on snow leopard conservation, and vice versa, in the past decade?

Based on the outcomes of the case study, what are the best practices and lessons learned in this model which could be applied to other developing sustainable tourism projects in relation to wildlife conservation? The author will draw on her background in wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism in East Africa in gathering information, and prescribing potential model replication and methods.

*Keywords: sustainable, tourism, development, snow leopard, Mongolia, wildlife, conservation, resources, Africa.*

## 1 Introduction

In November 2015, Lkhagvasumberel (Sumbe) Tomorsukh, Camp Manager and Research Assistant with the Snow Leopard Trust's Mongolia partner organization, Snow Leopard Conservation Foundation, was killed while working in defence of wildlife conservation. He was abducted outside his home in Ulaanbaatar and found dead in the Khuvsgul region of Northern Mongolia, over 1,000 kilometres from Ulaanbaatar which borders Russia. He had been attacked and threatened on at least three previous occasions. Sumbe's death marks a drastic shift in the relations between grazers, mining concessions, criminal wildlife traffickers, and wildlife conservationists in Mongolia. The full impact his death will have on wildlife conservation in Mongolia is yet to be seen. This paper is dedicated to Sumbe [1–3].

Mongolia, home of Genghis Khan, or Universal Ruler, became a democracy following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1990, declaring its full independence and politically shifting to complete self-governance, Mongolia sat at the precipice of new opportunities. Managing and utilizing its natural resources became a top priority for the government. One of these precious resources was a few of the remaining, highly endangered snow leopards.

According to the most recent figures, 2015, from the Snow Leopard Trust and the Wildlife Conservation Society, Mongolia is currently home to 500–1,000 of the estimated 3,500–7,000, approximately one quarter, of snow leopards left in the wild. Snow leopards, in Mongolia, have become an integral symbol of the government's commitment to wildlife conservation [4, 5].

Snow leopards, often called the “Ghosts of the Mountains”, are rarely seen by tourists to Central Asia. Still, few who travel to Mongolia are unaware of their endangered status. The snow leopards' rarity and endangered species status has been highly publicized, with snow leopards often central to conservation groups' public campaigns and used as a symbol of successful conservation in the Mongolian protected areas. The Mongolian Government, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private sector, and academia have approached the relationship between snow leopard conservation and sustainable tourism in ways that differentiate their practices from other countries. With limited wildlife resources and an increasing tourism industry Mongolia's practices are a case study for sustainable tourism development.

## 2 Government

The Mongolian Government has shown a clear commitment to the best use of its distinctive and rare natural resources, while having to balance conflicting demands. Mining concessions, grazers and conservationist's priorities can reach a point of conflict. Within the government, there are two features which distinguish Mongolia's practices from other countries. One is the sense of collective importance of wildlife conservation and the other is the government's ability to be flexible in response to changing trends or shifts in the tourism.



Reflective of the Mongolian people as a whole, the government has placed a high priority on viewing the relationship between wildlife conservation, including snow leopards, and tourism through the lens of what is good for the whole. In contrast to deeply tribal countries, where populations often work in conflict based on ethnic or religious lines, the Mongolian Government has, a deep cultural tradition of conservation and wildlife management for the betterment of the entire country.

According to the Ministry of Environment, Green Development and Tourism's 2014 *Mongolia's Protected Area Network*, a booklet published in conjunction with the United Nations Development Program - Global Environment Facility (UNDP-GEF), "Ancient Mongolian laws indicate details regarding conservation initiatives including 'Ikh zasag law' approved by Chinggis Khan [Genghis Khan] during the 12th century, 'Kkhalkh juram' law approved during the 16th century. Hunting, logging and disturbing the land were banned at 14 beautiful mountains..." According to the same document, between 2008 and 2014, Mongolia's Protected Area Networks (PAN) were increased by 3.6 million hectares [6].

In addition to being committed to wildlife conservation, the government has been nimble and responsive to changes in tourism demands. In late 2014, the Coalition Government of Mongolia changed the name of the Ministry of Environment and Green Development to the Ministry of Environment, Green Development and Tourism. This significant change highlights the Mongolian Government's awareness of the intricate ties between the environment and natural resources, such as wildlife, with the tourism industry. By tying directly Green Development and the Environment to Tourism, the Mongolian Government would, in theory, be able to put into place laws and regulations which balance the needs of wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism.

Figure 1 exemplifies the value of the snow leopards to the Mongolians, as viewed by the government. In 2013, the then titled Ministry of Environment and Green Development, printed tickets for the "Protected Area Entry Fee" with the dominate feature, in the upper left hand corner, being a picture of the endangered snow leopard.

Speaking in an in-person interview on 26 June 2015, the Mongolian Ministry of Environment, Green Development and Tourism, State Secretary Tsengel Tsegmid, Ph.D., speaking through interpreter Ganzorig Dulaanjargal, General Manager of the Democratic Community Union, stated that the "government is increasing the protected area for the endangered snow leopard." He went on to clarify that the PAN future expansion is dependent on all the government cabinets, not just the Ministry of Environment, Green Development and Tourism. And, without the PANs, there would be less tourism. Herein, is where the Nongovernmental Organizations, specifically those focused on conservation, have a unique relationship with the Mongolian Government [7].

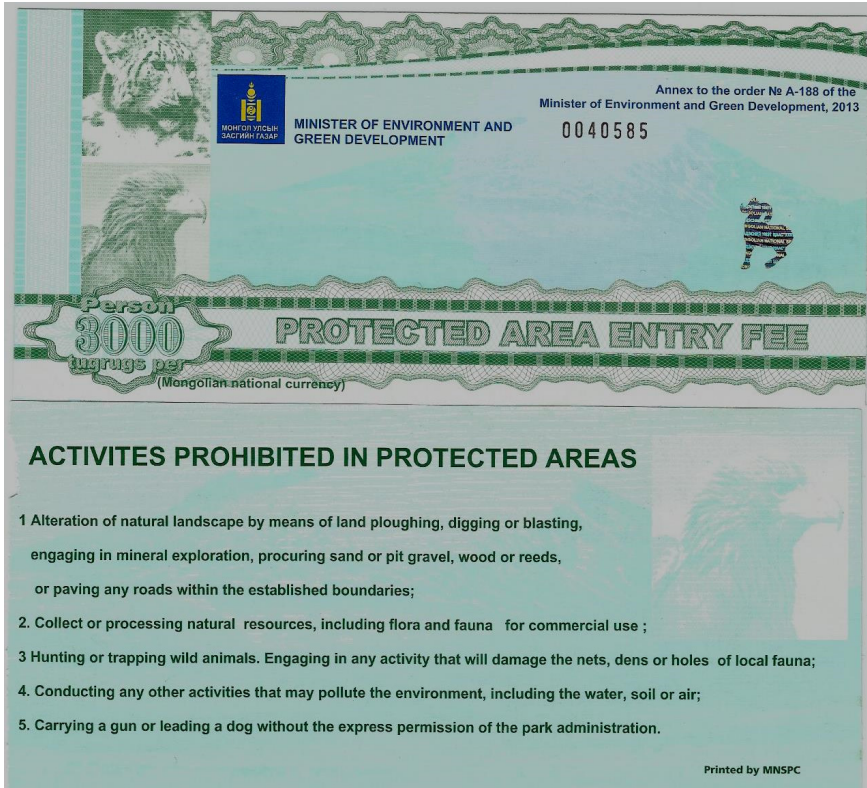


Figure 1: Ticket for “Protected Area Entry Fee,” issued 2013, still in use as of June, 2015, produced and issued by Mongolian Government, Ministry of Environment, Green Development and Tourism.

### 3 Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs)

Because of the Mongolian Government’s distinctive two-fold approach to the relationship between wildlife and sustainable tourism, conservation Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) operating in Mongolia previously worked in a fairly supportive environment, which is different than other countries. When asked about how he viewed the role of NGO’s contribution to tourism, The State Secretary for Environment, Green Development and Tourism, Dr. Tsegmid emphasized that the Mongolian government “collaborates with Nongovernmental Organizations by sharing materials and information. I view the role of the government to support information projects, including those of foreign NGOs” [7].

In addition, during an in-person interview at the Wildlife Conservation Society-Mongolia offices in Ulaanbaatar on 25 June 2015, with Enkhee Enkhtuvshin, DVM, MPVM, Acting Director, and Sanjaa Bolorstetseg, Environmental

Outreach and Training Specialist, both conveyed their sense of unity of mission with the Mongolian Government and NGOs. Bolorstetseg stated that, “NGOs are the go between the government, regulations, laws and the tourism industry. We push for study tours. And, we push for interactive, cultural experiences, such as homestays” [8].

Homestays, where tourists stay in the home of a local, indigenous person, learning their way of life, have been extremely successful in Mongolia. According to Dr. Enkhtuvshin, this is primarily due to the Mongolian “culture of hospitality.” While many cultures would like to claim the similar hospitality culture, one of the key factors in Mongolia’s success with this model has been the clearly set expectations of what the Homestay entails and how the tourists will be living. For instance, almost all homestays in Mongolia, especially outside Ulaanbaatar, take place in a traditional “Ger.” Gers are skin-covered, round tents which are portable in keeping with the nomadic Mongolian traditional in the Central Asian steppes.



Figure 2: Traditional Mongolian Gers, set for summer tourist season, June 2015.

When asked about the role of NGOs in sustainable tourism in Mongolia, Bayarjargal Agvaantseren, Country Program Director, Snow Leopard Conservation Foundation, the Mongolian partner of the Seattle, Washington based Snow Leopard Trust, sees the two as completely intertwined. Speaking at an in-person interview on 29 June 2015, Agvaantseren stated that “Conservation NGOs have more than the government capacity in raising awareness of ecotourism. For

example, local herders are encouraged to have self-help groups. Communities work together, to have skills to have livelihoods capacity building.” She continued, “Tour companies ask us about wildlife. There is the wish that building the capacity of locals in ecotourism would fill a gap for the local people, and it becomes organic, like herding” [9].

#### 4 Academia

Another key player in the relationship between sustainable tourism and wildlife conservation are scientists and researchers in academia. Enkhbileg “Bilegee” Dulamtseren, researcher biologist in the Mammalian Ecology Laboratory, at the Institute of Biology in the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, emphasized the roles everyone has in the conservation of wildlife in Mongolia. In an in-person interview on 30 June 2015, Bilegee offered that, “NGO’s are the bridge, but tourists have to be responsible. And, with a push to see two-thirds riding horses into the snow leopard protected areas, there is more of a chance that, in the Gobi [Desert], a tourist can see a snow leopard.” He continued that by shortening tourism to the Gobi to “one or two people, for 2 to 3 days, for a photo safari, local herders could regain money for livestock lost [to the snow leopards], especially for the valuable goats, which produce cashmere.”

Bilegee suggested that another way that academia could play a key role in sustainable tourism was to “use researchers as consultants on the relationship between, sustainable tourism and sustainable livelihoods.” He continued that “When looking at responsible, experiential tourism, biologists and ecologists know where the snow leopards are.” Lastly he said this “could also be applied to doing research to show the value of snow leopards to the Mining Industry,” so that wildlife conservation, sustainable tourism, and the Mining Industry could share the Protected Area Networks [10].

#### 5 Private sector

Where the Mongolian support of wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism diverge is in the private sector. As a result of encouraging tourism and in-country tourist operators, there has been little to no regulation. For example, currently, there is no regulation on who can or cannot call themselves an “ecotourism company.”

In late June 2015, Nadia Mijiddoorj, Conservation Manager at the Snow Leopard Conservation Foundation of the International Snow Leopard Trust, returned to Ulaanbaator, from field research in the Gobi Desert. In an interview on 30 June 2015, she stated that her primary concerns for snow leopard conservation was not only the huge influx of tourists into protected areas, but the ability for any Mongolian tour operator to simply put the word “Eco” in their name, regardless of their true credentials or intentions.

For instance, she cited a camp which had opened near to her research centre which claimed to be an “Eco” camp. But, when Ms. Mijiddoorj approached the camp owners to discuss her work and find out they were not working within any



set of guidelines for best or even acceptable practices in regard to the environment or wildlife conservation. “They simply had no way of justifying the word ‘Eco’ in their name, she said summing up the un-regulated, trendy term in tourism [11].

These concerns were echoed loudly by Khumbaa “Tumen” Tumendelger, Director/Owner of the TUM Ecotour, Tuman Ecological Tourism Company. TUM Ecotour was established in 1993 and its pedigree backs its use of the word “Eco.” Tumen has written and published numerous books, including, *100 Endemic Birds of Mongolia* and *Guide to Umnugobi Province*. In 2008, Tumen created the *Master Plan for Development of Tourism in Umnugobi Province*. This is in addition to funding and running the *Nature-Friendly Children’s Association*, “which is geared towards teaching children how to protect the environment, as well as *Camel Culture – Trainer Association* and the *Amazing Gobi* tourism associations” [12].

Tumen, speaking in an in-person interview, with interpreter Ganzorig Dulaanjargal, General Manager of the Democratic Community Union, interpreting, he stated that, there “are no rules and regulations for all over the country. This can lead to security issues for the tourists. Basically, if you go into a protected area, for example, and are not wearing suitable clothing, you can get in serious trouble in the Gobi.” He suggested that there needs to be professional training in the private sector, “across the industry, from guides to ticket takers.”

He offered three main ways that the private sector, specifically Ecotourism, should develop moving ahead in Mongolia: 1) Advertise government Ecotourism standards; 2) Convey to local peoples, specific routes and avenues for understanding of what is expected in Ecotourism; 3) have policy makers understand what Ecotourism is and its importance on a national scale [13].

The private sector, led by successful, qualified groups such as TUM Ecotour, is pushing for more regulation. With this call also coming from NGOs and academics, the Mongolian Government is being asked to push the way forward for the continued balance of wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism.

## 6 Conclusion

Looking closely at the cross section of those most deeply investing in successful wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism in Mongolia, it is clear there are several factors which set it apart. Unique to Mongolia is a cohesive, collective approach to conservation, which includes a deeply rooted cultural practice of hospitality. Added to this is the long history, beginning with the Universal Ruler, Chinggis Khan [Genghis Khan] 12th century conservation initiatives, ‘Ikh zasag law’. These are two factors which set Mongolia apart and arguably are not replicable.

This case study shows that Mongolia faces continued issues of conflicting use of natural resources. Because Mongolia has tied tourism directly with the “Environment and Green Development,” the nation is poised to offer, if this tie is implemented correctly, an example of best practices for East Africa. If the calls by the NGOs, academia, and the private sector to push for more regulations on the tourism industry, specifically with relation to “Ecotourism,” Mongolia could set best practices for others facing similar challenges, especially in East Africa.



What will determine Mongolia's success or failure in wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism, moving forward, is how it now addresses the dramatic change in grazers, mining concessions, criminal wildlife traffickers, and wildlife conservationists' relations in Mongolia. If the abduction death of Snow Leopard Conservation Foundation's Lkhagvasumberel (Sumbe) Tomorsukh, Camp Manager and Research Assistant is not addressed, the once cohesive nature of sustainable tourism and snow leopard conservation may prove detrimental to all involved. Prior to Sumbe's death, those in NGOs, academics and private sector expressed a belief in the shared goal of wildlife conservation and practicing good, sustainable tourism. That cohesion has been fractured. It is currently in the hands of the Ministry of Environment, Green Development and Tourism to lead the way ahead. The Secretary, reflecting the current government's positions, will determine the future of wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism in Mongolia.



Figure 3: Chinngis Khaan [Genghis Khan] Statue Complex, opened 2008.

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