

Protecting Mongolia's grassland steppes



The participation and leadership of local people is essential to natural resource management. (SUMCNR Photo: H. Ykhanbai)

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Overgrazing and global climate changes, along with political upheavals, are causing serious ecological problems in the windy grassland steppes of Mongolia — and threatening the livelihood of more than half the population who make a living from herding sheep, goats, cattle, horses, and camels. Grasslands are being replaced by desert shrub in the south of the country at an alarming rate, raising concerns for the national economy, which is reliant on livestock-raising.

Mongolia's Ministry for Nature and the Environment, with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), is now making moves to try and address the problem. A research project is currently underway which aims to help communities manage their grasslands and natural resources sustainably by working directly with those most affected.

Political changes

For centuries, Mongolia's herders were nomadic, roaming what is the world's biggest natural grassland in search of pastures for their animals — an approach that was environmentally sustainable. There was common access to land, and the herders lived in harmony with nature in this fragile and dry ecosystem in Central Asia.

Then, in 1921, the communist era imposed state ownership, with state-controlled collective farms — and traditional community practices that had preserved the pasture and grazing lands were lost. The central government owned all livestock and pastureland, herders belonged to collectives, and the state determined their nomadic wanderings and provided their supplies.

Yet another change occurred in 1990, when the 69-year communist regime came to an end with democratization and decentralization. As the herds were privatized, the number of herding families almost tripled and the number of herding animals skyrocketed — from 25 million in the early 1990s to 33 million by the year 2000. To compound the problem, the herders stopped roaming as much as they used to, with the richer ones living close to their winter and spring shelters for the entire year. The result of all these various changes has been serious overgrazing and environmental degradation.

Studies have shown that continuous grazing in the same pastureland can be much more damaging than a rotational system of roaming herds. Dense and stationary herds of grazing livestock can stop grass from growing altogether. In addition, once the pasture and soil in this windy grassland region is severely damaged, desertification can quickly set in. Indeed, Mongolia's own National Environmental Action Plan warns that the Gobi Desert in the country's southern region may be advancing northward by as much as 500 metres per year.

The poor get poorer

This slowdown in herd mobility is threatening the livelihood of 60% of the herding population — the poorer families own fewer than 100 animals but the rich more than 1,000 animals. Essentially, the pastoral poor are becoming poorer while wealth is enjoyed by a relative few. These are among the research results of Dr Hijaba Ykhanbai of Mongolia's Ministry for Nature and the Environment. With support from IDRC, he has been undertaking field studies and research on how to manage common natural resources sustainably in the face of the new market-oriented system.

"Beginning in the 1990s, herders have had to manage agriculture activities using their own knowledge — everything from herding to production to marketing to the sound use of (grassland) resources," explains Ykhanbai, who is project leader. "It hasn't been easy."

Field studies conducted in several "sums," or herding districts, have confirmed that herders who are on the best land are not moving or leaving it as they once did for fear that others may move in.

Surveys suggest that this hesitancy is due to the current ambiguity of the laws that govern the use of Mongolia's pastureland. In the newly approved land-use legislation, all pastureland is still subject to common use. For now, there is a lack of clarity in the law as to the meaning of "common use" and its relation to land use and land possession.

Meanwhile, there continues to be much debate in Mongolia's parliament over the merits of private rights to land and how to ensure the rich do not acquire all the best pastures.

Ykhanbai hopes that his research will contribute to restoring the traditional pastoral system in Mongolia, where herders not only develop an efficient pasture-management system, but "an effective pastureland dispute-settling mechanism as well."

Local leadership essential

He points out: "With privatization, natural-resource management was decentralized, but the exact role and responsibility of local communities wasn't clear. Currently, both local and central authorities make decisions on the use and protection of common natural resources, such as pastureland, water, forest, and wildlife. However, local people are separated from actual decision-making."

Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) is based on the concept that those people who use the natural resource, and are closest to it, understand it best — and they have the most vested interest in making it last. As the ability of ecosystems to recover diminishes, so do the employment and lifestyle options open to local people. Poor populations are further affected by the widespread possession and privatization of common resources on which they depend.

Traditional policies and research have often ignored the role of local people in designing and implementing solutions to these problems. And this, of course, is true in Mongolia where the state-run system during the communist era employed a highly centralized, top-down approach. The

CBNRM concept recognizes that the participation and leadership of local people is essential, and projects based on this approach work with the local men and women most directly involved in natural resource management — often the poorest of the poor and ethnic minorities who are politically and economically isolated.

Co-management teams

The project research team has established co-management teams for pasture and other natural resources at the "sum" or district level in three very different areas that include mountain and forest as well as grassland. Seven herding communities have been established in these three "sums", with the aim of encouraging the herders and local people to manage their grassland and pastures and other natural resources at the community level. The focus is on rotation based on local knowledge. The project team, which includes researchers and specialists from government and non-governmental organizations, universities and research institutions, is working closely with community members and the co-management teams to adapt and introduce CBNRM approaches and co-management principles. Support from local government and central government is also critical if such approaches are to work.

Already, in the first two years of the project, says Ykhanbai, it has become obvious that in countries like Mongolia that are in transition, the participation of all stakeholders is vitally important because of the varied interests and the weakness of the local management structure. It is also important for all community members, including women and different social groups, to be involved in decision-making at the community level, a concept that was unknown in the previous administrative system which did not seek the opinions of local people.

Participatory research — involving community members in the design and testing of both new and traditional ideas and methods of co-management of pasture and other natural resources in the different ecosystems of Mongolia — is going to require improvement in the skills of researchers, adds Ykhanbai. And, it is also obvious that the communities will need to find ways to adapt to global climate change that has recently resulted in an ongoing drought and hard winters in Mongolia.

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For more information:

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