

Sustainable Living and Mongolian Nomads: Is There Development?

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Author's Note

Though originally from Mongolia, I have lived and studied in London since 1997, but during this time, my connection with my homeland has motivated me to maintain a passion for its development. Consequently, I have studied Development and Economics at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

At the moment, I'm working for CAMDA, a UK charity that assists nomads in overcoming the difficult challenges they face, as well as Go Help UK, an organization with a strong presence in Mongolia fighting for child protection. Involvement with these groups has allowed me to take part in the arduous journey toward a developed Mongolia.

I have plans to study further in the field of agricultural and sustainable development, and, as the processes of development are not uniform from place to place, I want to explore the unique way Mongolia can attain proper development.

Keywords: Mongolia, Nomads, Self-sustainability.

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The first nomadic pastoral society developed around 8500-6500 BC in the southern Levant (modern-day Jordan and Southern Israel). It subsequently spread to the Eurasian steppe and, in the Middle Ages, to Turko-Mongol lands. Since then, nomadism has been a way of self-sustained living for the herders of Mongolia. Reliant on the vacillating seasons and the well-being of their livestock, nomadic herder families have developed a unique mode of living.

In the 1990s, the rapid transformation of the Mongolian economy and the country's political fomented radical changes. The most drastic shifts occurred in rural areas since nomadic living was no longer subject to state support as during the socialist era. The open economy brought with it the need for herders to acquire sources of income and take part in the monetary market to supply themselves with basic necessities once provided by the government. Over the last decade, tourism has grown rapidly in Mongolia. Travelers from all over the world are eager to explore a large chunk of Asia previously unseen in modern times. Tourism has generated a constant, albeit small, rise in Mongolia's GDP, and that upward trend is predicted to continue.

In the summer during tourist season, employment opportunities arise at resorts, *ger* camps and spas in regions of the country that tourists are inclined to visit. Some herder families send their children to schools and then further education in tourism and language courses so they can eventually secure full-time employment at the camp or resort. Such was the case with Saraa, the woman whose family I photographed. After graduating from university in the capital city Ulaanbaatar, Saraa had worked at the resort near where she is settled for three years as assistant manager. For many children of herder families, this career path is the only way to make a living that does not depend on the seasons. For herders that settle near a resort or camp, their traditional ways of life have been adapted to as what Mongolians call *zah zeel*, which literally translates as market and loans. The term means that, with the rapid burgeoning of tourism, the unique rituals and techniques of herders are now being performed for income.

Though an economic boon, the flourishing tourism industry also poses problems, increasing strains on resources of regions that are popular with visitors. One such resource is the water supply, an issue that has, in the last few years, received considerable attention from herders as well as NGOs and international organizationsⁱ. Droughts and poor pasture has exacerbated the need for water, which is usually utilized in huge amounts at tourist attractions

and resorts. Furthermore, the seasonal nature of tourism in Mongolia means herders see many difficult winters if their primary income is tourism. Plus, nomadic communities are vastly spread out, and not all herder families benefit from tourists in summer months, especially in remote regions.

For nomads, sustainable living is an important tradition and vital to their livelihood. This lifestyle needs more support to continue as viable for the significant portion of the Mongolian population that practices it. We need to learn from their simplicity of life and also recognize that nomadic herders can embrace development and progress, especially technological. Solar panels, wind generators and briquettes from recycled wood chippings are useful tools in their lives, as well as compact and environmentally friendly. Mongolians ourselves and travelers who visit must all realize that the preservation of this way of life is important. Otherwise, destabilizing plights like mass migration, unemployment and urban strains as well as illegal mining activities will increase due to herder poverty. When we photographed her in July 2008, Saraa had moved back to live with her nomadic community, including her parents and siblings, and was celebrating her engagement on the day we met.

The photographs have been taken in Arkhangai province near Tsenher village where Saraa and her family had settled for the summer. With their kindness and the support of Tseveendavaa Ozoi, who assisted me, I was able to enter their lives for a brief time.



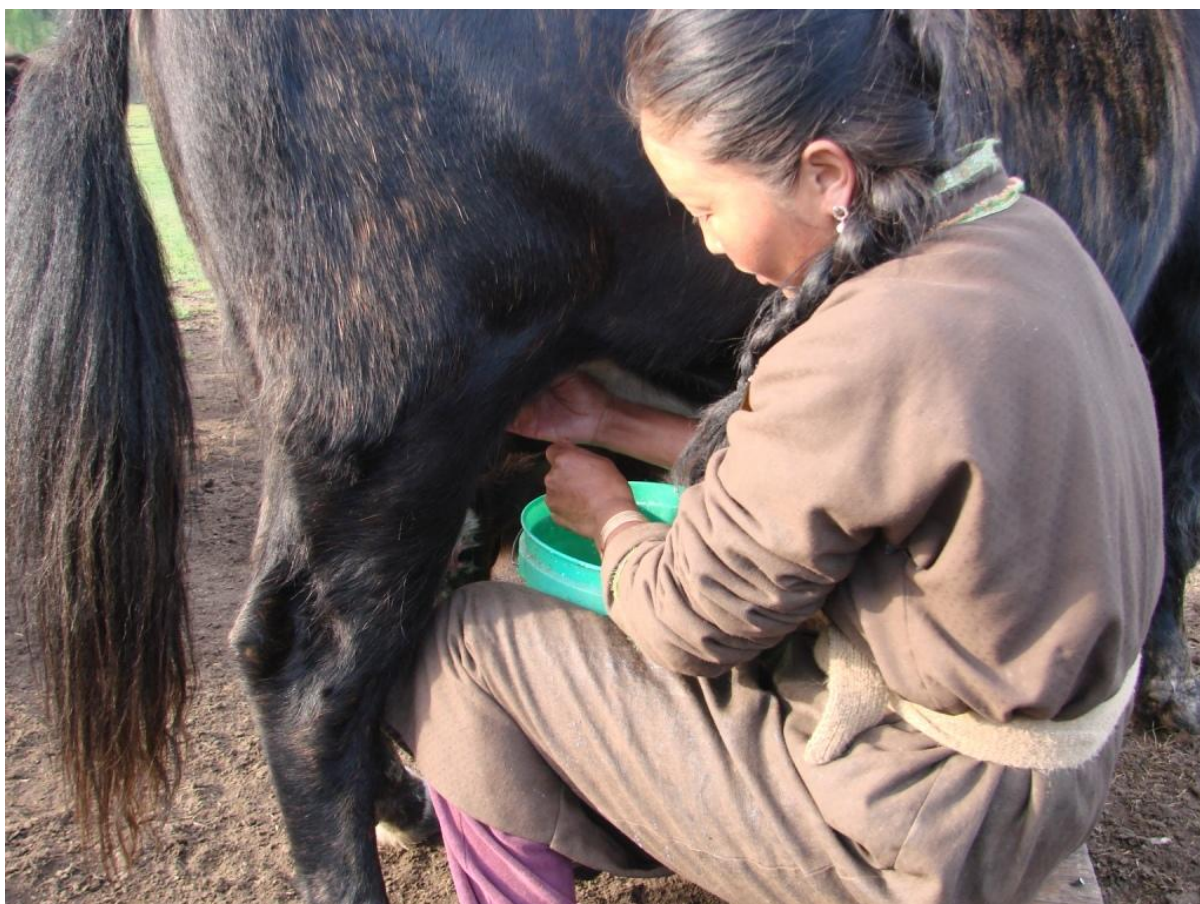
Although herders move with the seasons to more accommodating areas, some families find it profitable to return annually to where tourists hotspots during the summer months. Indeed, it can be the only source of their livelihood in years when the seasons are not kind to their livestock. Such was the case between 2000 and 2003 when *dzud*ⁱⁱ occurred and depleted the nation's stock, which has not recovered fully since.



When choosing seasonal settlements, water is a big issue for herder families. It is often necessary for them to travel long distances to wells. In the province of Arkhangai, water supply is not as scarce as in more remote regions like the Gobi desert to the south.



Saraa's family had settled near a hot spring resort known as 'Shiveet Mankhan' not far from Tsenher village in Arkhangai province. Here, water is relatively easy to access. Many people from herder families find summer work in this resort and its neighboring camps. They also benefit from electrical generators and wells. Thus, it is practical to remain close to camps resorts like this one.



A national programⁱⁱⁱ in Mongolia was implemented to attempt to satisfy the basic energy needs of nomadic herding families in the dispersed and distant poor rural communities. So far, 48,000 families have adopted solar panels and wind generators. Following this success, the '100,000 solar lights' program has been implemented to supply, at a steeply discounted price, the remaining 120,000 families lacking a connection to the central grid with solar and wind generators. This initiative is an important improvement since the vastness of Mongolia can leave a herder family totally isolated for much of the year. Electricity means access to news broadcasts and weather reports along with a better chance of political participation in the rural areas and the growing awareness of environmental sustainability and resource management.



Settling near a tourist camp or resort gives the entrepreneurial herder the opportunity to make small profit from selling dairy produce as well as meat and *boodog*^{iv} directly to the curious tourists. Sometimes, they can even make an agreement to supply the camp itself for a consistent flow of income. Such economy has become profitable for herders, but the decreased total number of livestock and prospects for maintaining a sustainable level of cattle needs to be addressed in the long term.



Dairy produce yields a significant proportion of a herder family's income and daily diet. Yaks are particularly useful as their milk can be used to make *orom*.^v Along with *orom*, *aaruu*, *aarts* and *byaslag*^{vi} and simple milk are all self-sustainable foods.



The Yaks are milked every morning by hand. Each family owns different numbers of Yaks. This particular summer, four families had settled together, owning about five Yaks each and sharing the work amongst themselves.



The amount of milk produced from each family's Yaks depends on the growth of vegetation and quality of the pastures in that year.



Simmering of the Yak milk is a morning ritual for herder families.



The process of clotting the milk can take all day; a cup of salted milky tea is a herder family culinary staple.



Byaslag is made by sieving *aarts*^{vii} from the milk through a bag and molding into a shape. It is later sliced and served to guests. Most of the guests are from next door and frequently visit unannounced.



Making *aaruul* is an old tradition done by wrapping the *aarts* in a piece of cloth, forming a shape and cutting it into thin pieces with a string. The *aaruul* is placed on a board to dry.



It is usual for the board with *aaruul* to be placed on top of the *ger*. When a family is expecting guests or holding a gathering (as it was Saraa's family for their engagement party), *tsagaan idee*^{viii} is essential and used as a snack, decorating the table and serving as farewell gifts. Dairy products are associated with goodness and generosity.



The last stages of making *aaruul*.



One use of a mare's milk is to produce *mermel*^{ix} in the *ger*.



From an early age, children of herder families learn many skills and techniques of animal husbandry, the nomadic way, as well as methods of self-sustainability. Many families believe in the benefits of having many children, who prove helpful at all ages. However, the consistency and quality of education received by each child vary from province to province and based on the family's financial situation. A family's financial health generally boils down to good pasture growth.



In the mountains in Arkhangai, wild strawberries grow in abundance, and many kids pick them to sell to tourists and campers.



The mares are milked in the mornings and evenings. Their milk is used as a natural remedy and is often sold to Mongolians and some tourists. It is also used to produce *airag*^x—made by fermenting the mare's milk over the course of hours or days, often while stirring or churning. Because mare's milk contains more sugar than the cow's or goat's milk, *airag* has a higher, though still mild, alcohol content.



Herders have developed to use new technologies as well as new means of living. However, living standards have stagnated. This arrested development of their quality of life can be explained by the lack of long-term strategic development projects and plans to improve the capacity of herders to endure natural disasters. As mentioned above, herders' ability to remain self-sustained and independent of seasonal boosts like tourism also must be addressed.



The changes tourism brings to the herders and their lives can benefit those who, for example, were previously unable to attend school, but how sustainable are these changes? Nomadic living may need to evolve so that the next generation of herder families can have better opportunities and, more importantly, the knowledge to sustain their unique way of living.

Endnotes

¹ One involved group is the Cambridge and Mongolia Development Appeal (CAMDA), which was established to support the Mongolian nomadic community through grassroots solutions. You can learn more www.camda.org.uk.

² Natural disaster affecting the livestock caused by severe natural conditions such as drought and/or excessive heat/snow.

³ The '100,000 solar *gers*.'

⁴ Steam cooked whole goat.

⁵ Simmering of the milk and standing to cool to create clotted cream.

⁶ Various types of cheeses made using different methods.

⁷ Made by curdling the milk and using the solids to form other types of dairy produce.

⁸ Literally meaning white produce.

⁹ Fermented mare's milk is strengthened through freeze distillation, but it is more commonly distilled into the spirit known as *arkhi* in a large metal container. It is commonly drunk by herders and is said to be a very pure form of alcohol.

¹⁰ Also known as *kumis* amongst the people from the Central Asian steppe.
