

Mongolia's nomads turn to private land

October 21 2013, by Sebastien Blanc



Mongolian sheep and cattle graze grasslands at the Hustai National Park in Mongolia on June 5, 2013

Mongolia's nomads have roamed its sprawling grasslands for centuries, pitching their yurts wherever they find pasture for their animals, but now Tsogtsaikhan Orgodol is staying put as part of a scheme to tackle chronic overgrazing.

The tanned 53-year-old still wears his nomad's riding boots, but he and his community have been given exclusive rights to 1,000 hectares (2,500

acres) of steppe in exchange for reducing their herds and remaining in the same place all year round, giving the land a chance to regenerate.

"I have agreed to cut the number of our goats in half," said Orgodol, looking out from horseback over their 200 animals, mostly sheep and some cows, who despite the project principles are not fenced in.

"The only problem is when other animals come," he added. "They sense where the good grass is. We have to chase them away. There is no other mechanism."

According to MCC's website, the project will cover about 300 tracts of land near Ulan Bator and Mongolia's next two largest towns, Erdenet and Darkhan, involving around 1,000 households in total.

Orgodol's 22-strong group shares two yurts, known as gers in Mongolia, and a permanent house next to a barn about 45 kilometres (30 miles) outside the capital Ulan Bator.

The national tradition is for land to be accessible to all, with pastoralist families moving several times a year in search of fodder and water.

But Nyamsuren Lkhagvasuren, who runs the land programme for the US-funded aid agency Millennium Challenge Corporation, told AFP: "The number of livestock has exploded to more than 40 million.

"This goes beyond the limits of what is reasonable, even for Mongolia, which is a vast country."

In a study published last month in the journal *Global Change Biology*, researchers from the University of Oregon using satellite images from NASA found that 70 percent of Mongolia's grassland—which makes up almost four-fifths of the country—is now "degraded".

Twelve percent of the country's biomass has disappeared in recent years, they said, calling overgrazing a "primary contributor" to the alarming decline of the steppe.

Livestock was collectivised under the socialist planned economy imposed under decades of Communist dictatorship when Mongolia was a satellite of the Soviet Union.

But since the advent of democracy and a market economy in 1990 many Mongolians have returned to their sheep and cattle—partly because unemployment shot up—so that 40 percent of the working population are now herders.

Agriculture Minister Battulga Khaltmaa—a former judo champion—acknowledged concerns about desertification but downplayed the University of Oregon findings, attributing the problem to climate change rather than overgrazing.

"The number of animals is not that high compared to the size of the land," he said.

In the Soviet era even greater numbers of cattle roamed the country of 1.6 million square kilometres, he pointed out.

"Under socialism we had 26 million livestock and under Stalin the target was set at 250 million in order to meet the demand for meat in Siberia."

But herders who cannot command high prices resort to selling large quantities instead, said Thomas Pavie, an agriculture expert who advises French government projects in Mongolia.

"There is indeed overgrazing, especially in the production of cashmere. The problem is that Mongolia exports wool in the form of raw material,

particularly to China, so the value-added happens somewhere else," he said.

"That requires them to produce a lot. If wool were sold more expensively, they would need fewer [animals](#)."

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