

## Nomadic herders' new perception and options

Naranbek Ristan slings his binoculars round his neck, packs his notebook and mounts his horse with the graceful ease of long practice. Like his family, friends and loved ones he was born to ride and now he is doing it for something rather special. Naranbek (and his horse) are about to begin a monthly patrol of 6,000 hectares of community land to check on wildlife.

Naranbek's patrol will cover country that inspires descriptions; harsh, cold, wind-swept, desolate, lonely, magnificent, daunting, challenging, life nurturing and for Naranbek the most important word of all; Home.

Naranbek lives in the Kazakh community of Akhbastau (lit: White Springs) which lies in the Altai Mountains in the extreme west of Mongolia. People here are proud, dignified herders, hunters and horsemen. Some people use falcons

– here they use golden eagles. Their homes are mobile, very mobile! Their “gers” (yurts) are warmed by horse dung fuelled stoves and decorated with colourful doors with walls and floors brightened by multi-hued carpets. Comfort and hospitality are always to be found in these gers.

Naranbek's community is dwarfed by its landscape and consists of just 12 households herding 2,300 heads of livestock, mainly sheep, goats, yaks and horses.

Ristan and his horse may be small in comparison to the part of the world they patrol but in global terms it is of grand significance. The Altai Mountains are part of the Altai Sayan Ecoregion which is a priority area for global conservation that straddles four countries - Mongolia, China, Kazakstan, and Russia. Biodiversity? Yes, of course. Many endemics, as well as endangered species such as the snow leopard and the giant Argali sheep.

The winters are long and brutal. Light snow falls even in August. Fierce gales combined with drought create a catastrophic phenomenon called the ‘dzud’. This is a terror and a menace. Dzud, which are becoming increasingly frequent and severe, killed over 9 million head of livestock (or 20% of Mongolia's total livestock) in 2009 alone.

The older generations in Naranbek's community talk of frightening environmental changes over the last 70 years. Wildlife numbers, they say, have decreased significantly and the pasture conditions are much poorer.



Overgrazing is one driving force but climate change here exacerbates the problem. The situation is complex. Many herders have stopped traditional rotational grazing methods that involved moving seasonally in search of good pasture, leaving time for other pasturelands to recover.



Problems invite solutions and in 2006, the families in the Altai Mountain region started forming herder groups. They were supported by the government's Altai Sayan Project with contributions from the UNDP, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Government of Netherlands and other partners with a combined contribution of US\$ 11.2 million.

Amangul Sakeyi is a social mobilizer and was involved in the initiative, which she describes with pride as a success. The biggest achievement of the project? "Changing herders' perceptions," she says. "Through forming a community group and taking charge of managing a defined area of land, people feel much more responsible for caring for their pasture and wildlife resources."

Results are impressive. 64 officially registered Community Groups have been established to manage the sustainable use of natural resources on land covering approximately 513,500 ha, and there is a community fund to support livelihood activities. Communities now have more diversified income sources and better management of natural resources, making them more resilient to natural disasters. This has also significantly reduced hunting and fishing pressure with a measurable increase in the population of globally important target species.

Naranbek, our intrepid horse rider with notebook and binoculars is a herder but he participated in training courses provided by the Project to support wildlife monitoring activities and as he gallops off the information will be collated and analysed by the Environment Unit of the Soum Government, created with the project's support. This multidisciplinary unit comprises extension officers from different disciplines including environment, agriculture, land use planning and education, and is mandated to render continuous support to herder community groups.

"Before the training and wildlife monitoring, wild animals looked rather similar to me," says Naranbek. "But now I can recognize individuals and I really enjoy observing the different behaviour of snow leopard and the other animals." He says that learning about wildlife is also beneficial for avoiding human/wildlife conflict as it enables the community to better predict wildlife attacks on livestock and take precautionary measures.



Forming a community group with other households has also helped individual herder families. They cooperate in sheep wool sheering making the process much more efficient, and they collectively plan rotational grazing and also coordinate hay making in preparation for winter months and dzud. After some careful thought, the community decided to decrease the number of livestock as they realised that there were just too many for the grasslands environment to support. Quantity was reduced, but the quality of livestock improved.

The community has also established a hospitality ger for tourists who want to experience the nomadic life of Kazakh people, and see and photograph the breathtaking vistas, wildlife, geology, plants and spring flowers.



Horse trekking is also proving a success. Fifteen percent of tourism income is put into the community fund and the rest is divided among the households.

“We now have more options and different income sources,” says Naranbek. “And we are better prepared for harsh winters. The dzud impact in this community was minimal last year, which I believe is owing to our organisation.”

In large, sparsely populated countries like Mongolia, community based natural resource management is critical, as the only eyes and ears in many wilderness areas belong, like their land and all that lives in it, to community people.

I watch Naranbek ride off, he and his horse dwindling in a landscape built for giants but small as he looks he’s doing great things. And when he comes back to his ger and his folk who knows what he will have to tell them about the snow leopards he has seen?

#### POST SCRIPT:

Akhabastau is one of the nearly 100 communities groups that were supported by the project. Multi-tiered interventions of the project at community, local government and national levels, are ensuring the sustainability of the project’s impact. Most importantly, by the time of the project closure in December 2011, 20 Environment Units were instituted within the local governor’s office. This approach has been replicated nationwide through a Ministerial decree in June 2011. The Environmental Protection Law was amended to include clear legal provision and incentives for community based natural resource management. These combined, empower people to take charge of their resources and continue to treasure them and use them for livelihood improvement for generations to come.

**Photo credit:** Midori Paxton

#### Captions:

1. Naranbek Ristan on his horseback
2. Golden eagle is used by the Khazakhs to hunt animals. Eagle chicks are captured from the nest and trained, and released after six seasons of hunting.
3. Naranbek observe the Akhabastau landscape with binoculars.
4. Amangul Sakeyi is not only good with people but is a accomplished donbro (Kazakh Guitar) player and singer.
5. Naranbek’s aunts drinking horse milk tea at home in their family ger.