A Site and its narratives: Mongol Daguur, an area where it is still possible to halt the 'Fortress Conservation'

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ABSTRACT: This research focuses on the Mongol Daguur – situated in the most northeastern province (*aimag*) of Mongolia – Dornod – which the Mongolian parliament identified as a restricted access area in the early 1990s and the state legislature recognized as a special protection area in 1995. A Ramsar site, it has been in UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves since 2007. The zoning of the area provides for different 'levels' of conservation and human presence. The creation and enforcement of protected areas with the identification of the zones and, later, the redrawing

[1] Although the research was conducted jointly and the article was conceived together, Tosi Cambini authored the first part (section 1), and Breda the second part (section 2). The Introduction and Conclusions were written together by both authors. Pseudonyms are used for the herders involved in the research.

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of its borders, caused friction among the inhabitants and the authorities, which currently plays out through silent strategies and 'avoidance' on the part of the former, and notices and pressure with fines on the part of the latter. Through the lens of the 'fortress conservation', this article considers a network of human and nonhuman actors (mobile pastoralists, authorities, companies, laws, animals, bodies of water, etc.) and the narratives around the conflict – at times covert, at times overt – between the authorities and nomads, unfolding in the second section with the topic of the 'social life of water', which develops the case study of wetlands and springs. Our investigation will lead us to examine and critically discuss the fortress conservation process that is taking place in these areas, identifying the possibility of stopping it and implementing policies that go against it.

INTRODUCTION

Our research was set in Northeastern Mongolia, in Dornod province (*aimag*), bordering on Russia and China in the ecoregion of the Daurian Steppe (Figure 1), which stretches from eastern Mongolia to Russian Siberia and Northeastern China. The 'Landscapes of Dauria' transboundary property (Figure 2) was inscribed in the World Natural Heritage List in 2017 with the joint nomination of Russia and Mongolia, but as of 1994 the Daurian International Protected Area Agreement (DIPA) between Mongolia, Russia and China 'provides a forum for the States Parties to discuss, on a regular basis, all issues in relation to the preservation of the property and its management, at both political and operational levels'.[2] The UNESCO and Mongolian official document description of the property, echoing Brockington's (2002) words, are 'powered by the emotive and mystical appeal of wilderness, stunning landscapes and the aura of extraordinary biodiversity' (p. 3). The criteria of Outstanding Universal Value (ix and x) define this habitat as able to host a large variety of species and communities, characteristic of the northern part of the vast Daurian Steppe ecoregion. The large diversity of ecosystems, biotopes and large

[2] See https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1448/. See also the project at: https://www.iucn.org/sites/default/files/import/downloads/dauriaclimate.pdf

areas of transition from taiga to desert is indicative of the many evolutionary adaptive processes undergone by species living in this unique area. The integrity of this sprawling park is known to derive from its vast landscape and low anthropogenic pressure.[3] 'Most of this property is surrounded by a World Heritage buffer zone of 307,317 ha, which overlaps with Ramsar sites and UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in both countries (Mongol Daguur in Mongolia and Torrey Lakes in the Russian Federation).'[4]

Figure 1. Daurian Steppe Ecoregion. (www.globalsecurity.org)

[3] See https://whc.unesco.org/document/191675.
[4] See https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1448/.

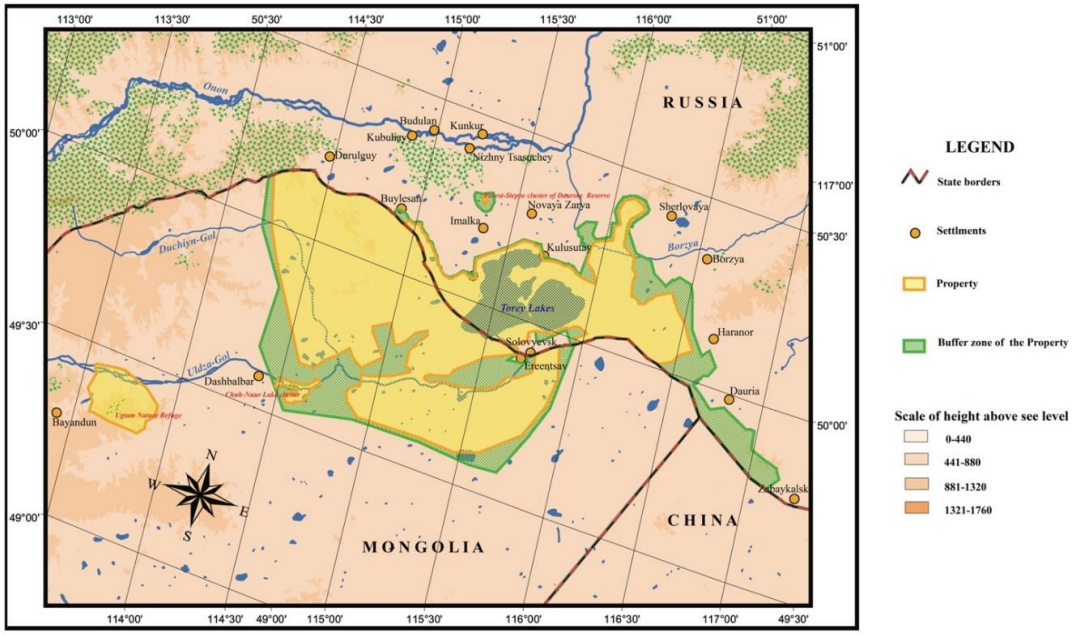

Figure 2. Boundaries of the 'Landscape of Dauria' property with buffer zone. Scale 1:500,000. (State Nature Biosphere Reserve, Daursky, 2017)

The fieldwork was conducted mostly in Mongol Daguur, which the Mongolian parliament identified as a restricted access area in the early 1990s and the state legislature recognized as a special protection area in 1995. A Ramsar site, it has been in UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves since 2007. With Torey Lakes Тоорой нуур (part A) and the Ulz (or Uldza) River *Улз гол* (part B) overlooking it, Mongol Daguur abounds with little lakes, waterways and wetlands, with an extremely varied flora and fauna (31 mammal, 256 bird, 349 plant species, etc.); likewise, Dornod is characterized by different 'ethnic' groups and the local population has ancient worship ties with the Khukh mountain range. As we shall see later, the zoning of the Mongol Daguur provides for different 'levels' of conservation and human presence (see Namkhai, 2021). The creation and enforcement of protected areas with the identification of the zones and, later, the redrawing of its borders on the one hand, and on the other, the emotional, ecological, ontological and practical evaluation of its nonhuman elements, in particular its waters, caused friction between the inhabitants and the authorities, which currently plays out through silent strategies and 'avoidance' on the part of the former and notices and pressure with

fines on the part of the latter. Through the lens of the 'fortress conservation' (Brockington, 2002; Robinson et al., 2017), section 1 of this article considers a network of human and nonhuman actors (herders, institutions, companies, laws, animals, bodies of water, etc.), the narratives around the conflict – at times covert, at times overt – between the authorities and nomads. Section 2 addresses the topic of the 'social life of water' (Wagner, 2013), developing the case study of wetlands and springs.

Our investigation will lead us to examine and critically discuss the fortress conservation process that is taking place in these areas, identifying the possibility of stopping it and implementing policies that go against it, so that in Mongol Daguur (and in the Landscape of Dauria, discussed here regarding its Mongolian part) there should be virtuous practices between the authorities and the nomads in order to decolonize the conservation policies.

1. NARRATIVES, CONTRADICTIONS AND CONFLICTS

During our second fieldwork (June–July 2023), we more deeply explored the relationships between the nomadic families who live in Mongolian Daguur and the authorities who manage this protected area and the World Heritage site Landscape of Dauria. We investigated the different points of view and narratives through interviews with stakeholders who manage the site (Mongolian Daguur SPA) and the property (Landscape of Dauria).[5] We addressed the topic with the herders several times during our fieldwork (helped by living with a family and being involved in their relatives and 'neighbourhood' network), visited the territory with them (including the Chuh Lake basin) and studied the documentation on the state of conservation of the park. We deal with these relationships and narratives using the words of the authorities as a starting point, since they are often ambiguous as are the 'law' and the 'rules' to which they say they must comply and to which they refer in a generic way. From the juxtaposition and comparison of their statements and opinions with official documents and with

[5] In particular, we interviewed the Manager of the Park Authority in Choibalsan, the Chairman of the Culture and Arts Department of Dornod Province (we met him also during the previous fieldwork in 2022) and the Mayor of Dalshbalbar. Furthermore, we had the opportunity to interview the two rangers of Mongol Duguur during their visit to the family hosting us, as well as having met the previous ranger during the 2022 fieldwork.

ethnographic observations among the pastoral nomads, we have identified some main thematic areas that we address below: state management of the area and the risk of displacement; the degradation discourse and herders' contributions to conservation; and 'fluidity' and mobility rights.

Table 1. Various levels of protection that overlap in the area

Year	**Name**	**Characteristics**	**Related tables and maps**
1992	Mongol Daguur	Restricted Access Area. National legal designation	
1994	Daurian International Protected Area Agreement (DIPA)	Transboundary area, Mongolia, Russia and China. International designation	
1995	Mongol Daguur SPA	Specially Protected Area. National legal designation	Table 2; Figures 3, 10
1997	Mongol Daguur Wetlands (Uldz river basin)	Ramsar sites. International designation	Figures 8, 9, 10
2007	Mongol Daguur UNESCO World Biosphere	Man and Biosphere Reserve (MAB), UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves. International designation. The area of the site corresponds to that of Mongol Daguur SPA	Figure 3
2017	Landscapes of Dauria	UNESCO World Natural Heritage; Transboundary area, Russia and Mongolia. International designation	Table 2; Figures 2, 3

1.1. STATE MANAGEMENT OF THE AREA AND THE RISK OF DISPLACEMENT

As the postsocialist literature on rural policy shows, during the 1990s, 'the government of Mongolia introduced neo-liberal reforms and statist conservationist policies to the rural sector, as alternative ways to obtain economic benefits and to promote wildlife and landscape protection' (Undargaa, 2023, p. 271), outlining a tangle of ambiguous and murky multi-scalar laws, rules and norms (see, for example, Bumochir, 2020; Fernández-Giménez, 2002; Marin, 2008; Robinson et al., 2017; Sneath, 2003; Upton, 2009). Our case study fits into this frame since the current protection measures and multiple designations of the sites are not the results of grassroots initiatives but of a top-down state process. In this way, moving inside our research context, it is necessary to address some aspects of the complicated and unresolved relationships between the various levels of 'protection' regarding our fieldwork context. First, our research reveals the absence of population participation in the zoning definition process, since the authorities did not involve the people in decision-making processes regarding the areas and the park. Secondly, we found a lack of integrated rules and a severe delay in reviewing the management plan of various sites belonging to the Landscape of Dauria property. This delay causes us to ask questions about the difficulties of the park authorities in their relationship with the central government, international organizations and the inhabitants of the areas.[6]

Table 2 illustrates the components of the park. Looking just at the Mongolian context, the variability in 'protection regimes' across the areas is easily grasped.

The Mongol Daguur Specially Protected Area (SPA) was established in 1992, and its protection status was adopted by the Mongolian Parliament (State Baga Khural) Resolution 26/1995 in conformity with the law on Specially Protected Areas. Its zoning was designed by national law and rules as follows: core zone, conservation zone, limited-use zone and buffer zone. In 2007, Mongol Daguur entered in the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve Programme and Network and – as for the other Mongolian Biosphere

[6] In both our 2022 and 2023 meetings, we asked the Manager of the Park Authority in Choibalsan for a copy of the management plan. His answer was always affirmative, without any comment, except – obviously – never letting us receive it.

Reserves – in 2017 the Ministry establishing a new zoning required by UNESCO: core, buffer and transition zones. That redefinition involved the shifting of the zone boundaries, in particular in terms of activities permitted (see Chimeddulam, 2015; Namkhai, 2021, pp. 21-36). Families living in the areas were not involved in the definition of zones, boundaries or the associated protection regimes, either in the 1990s or subsequently after 2007. Both parts A and B of the Mongol Daguur have a core zone: the most important parts of the former – overlooked by Torey Lakes – is a section of the lake and Kukh Mountain and its vicinity. The main part of the core zone of part B – on the shores of the Ulz River – is comprised of Duruu Lake and its vicinity, along with the swampy shores, small lakes, river branches and floodplains in the east of Il Turuut Mountain (Figure 3).

Table 2. Components of the Landscape of Dauria property (IUCN, 2017, p. 6)

Protected area / buffer zone	***Area (ha)***	
	Nominated property	*WH buffer zone*
Russian Federation		
Daursky SNBR	49,765	128,888
Daursky SNBR buffer zone	117,690	
Valley of Dzeren FNR	111,568	
Subtotal area in Russian Federation	279,023	128,888
Mongolia		
Mongol Daguur SPA 'A'	87,780	178,429
Mongol Daguur SPA 'B'	15,236	
Mongol Daguur SPA buffer zone	484,425	
Ugtam Nature Refuge	46,160	
Subtotal area in Mongolia	633,601	178,429
Total	**912,624 ha**	**307,317 ha**

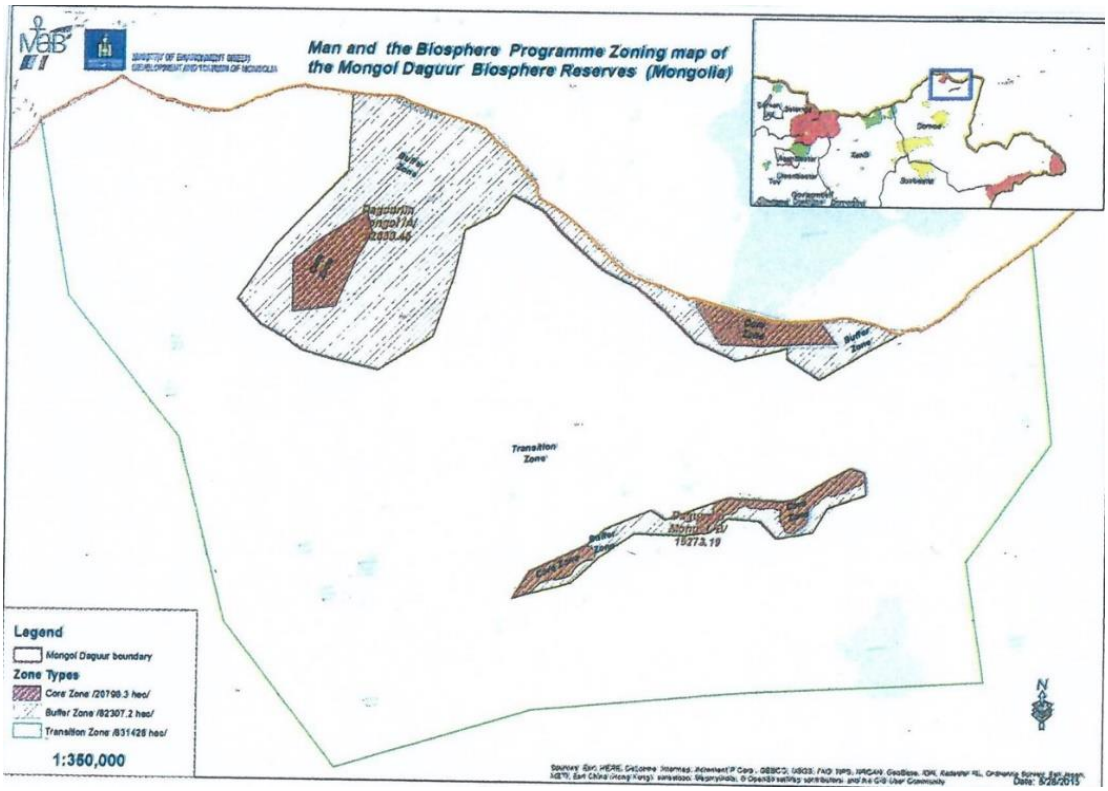

Figure 3 Zoning map of the Mongol Daguur Biosphere Reserve. The boundaries of its transition zone correspond to those of the Mongolian part of the buffer zone of 'Landscape of Dauria' (Namkhai 2021, p. 199)

According to the current data, there are 74 herder households residing in the buffer zone in the Dashbalbar *sum* territory (approximately 400,000 ha from Dashbalbar *sum* territory are included in the SPA buffer zone). It is a buffer zone considered by the authorities to be relatively densely inhabited by local communities and their herds, especially due to a partial overlap with areas where rare bird species are found or with the migratory routes of the Mongolian gazelle:

> Mongol Daguur Biosphere Reserve is relatively close to human settlements compared to the rest of Eastern Mongolia. So human induced impacts may be higher than the SPA […]. However, a number of concerns such as steppe forest fire, illegal hunting, and overgrazing, poor

> livelihoods, lack of drinking water, and inadequate legal and ecological education among local communities still exist in the region. (Namkhai, 2021, pp. 200-201).

And that's not all: the Dornod Protected Areas Administration (PAA) aims to protect and make wildlife habitats free from human and livestock inhabitants by altering the *sum* land-use plans in close collaboration with the local government. In line with that conservation development programme, one of the objectives deemed most important is to orient buffer zone residents towards environmental conservation.

Furthermore, looking carefully at the boundaries of the Landscape of Dauria property (Figure 2), we can find the Chuh Lake basin (*Чух нуурын*). We have to note that this part of the property that 'has been "excised" from the former World Heritage buffer zone and now included within the nominated area, lies within the large buffer zone of Mongol Daguur SPA and is subject to communal ownership under a cooperative of ten families (the Chuh Lake Herders Association)' (IUCN, 2017, p. 6). The latter aspect – the cooperative – was a cause of concern for the IUCN.[7] Given that Mongolia has indicated that international law supersedes national law, the UNESCO Convention has required a regime of 'additional protection'.

On 27 June 2023, we met and interviewed the manager of the park authority in his office in Choibalsan. 'We've lived here, for hundreds of years, among the gazelles, so you can't move us!': through this statement he sums up for us the stance of the herders living in Mongol Daguur in response to our question about the issues between the park administration and the inhabitants, that we'd already picked up on during fieldwork in the previous year. There are more than 20 nomad families who have their seasonal camps, their pastureland and their everyday life in this SPA of the Biosphere Reserve.

Faced with the real possibility of displacement that was communicated to them by the authorities, 'they asked for a good place,' the manager says, and he goes on: 'some would go, some wouldn't.'

'But why do they have to go, what are the actual reasons?' we ask.

[7] We will return on these types of rural self-governing institutions in Mongol Daguur.

'It's the law,' he answers, just as the rangers we came across in the area would reply. And in the wake of our questions he explains that their Choibalsan office sends a letter to the local government of Dashbalbar with messages to give to the families. It is the rangers (there are five in all between the two *sums* of the Mongol Danguur) who go to the *gers* to explain the documents to the herders and show them maps with the boundaries of the zones.

'And what do the families say?' we ask.

'They don't say anything, they listen and remain silent,' he answers. The manager points out to us that, right now, no families have moved out of the buffer zone: 'If they don't go, maybe we'll be forced to move them through coercion,' he comments.

As Brockington (2015) states, referring to Adams (2004), 'Fortress conservation may have begun as a foreign imposition, but, it has been thoroughly well grafted onto and accepted by its host countries', and it 'is an important source of revenue and prestige for […] governments. It provides spaces for tourists and can be integral to modernization goals and agendas' (p. 2).

1.2. DEGRADATION DISCOURSE AND HERDERS CONTRIBUTIONS TO CONSERVATION

Immediately after the previous statements on the need for a displacement of the families, the manager adds that the families are very helpful in putting out fires, given that it would be very damaging to their pastureland, too, and he ends his speech by asserting, 'The government can't solve everything, so humans are always useful.' Contradictions start to emerge and are located here in the local authorities' observation of the importance of herders also in conservation itself: on the one hand, they must go according to a top-down governance; on the other hand, without them the local authorities are unable to preserve the park itself.

These contradictions are also perceived when the discussion enters more closely into the perspective of our research, in particular with respect to the relationship between scholars and inhabitants. The manager tells us that there is no involvement even in this scope since 'scientists don't involve the nomads'. Thus Ariuntseg's words from July 2022

echo in our minds.[8] After a few days of being guests at one of her gers located in the buffer zone, she looks at us with mingled sweetness, awe and satisfaction. She tells us that it's the first time that researchers have stayed for so long, that every once in a while someone would pass through, but just for a few hours. Looking almost amused, her eldest son immediately pointed out that no one had ever stopped to stay with them; while the husband, the elderly Batsaikhan, his deep eyes on us, hinted at a smile.

Lastly, when asked how the park is faring, the manager dwells on different environmental problems. In addition to fires, the issue of water is another focal point, with the Ulz's tributaries' low water flow and the shrinking of the wetlands. This, on top of human exploitation; but this time the emphasis is placed not so much, and not only, on the pastureland, but on multinational companies that carry out intensive farming and mining activities, with copper and gold mines, just beyond the Biosphere Reserve's bounds.

Despite the purpose of the Mongolian law (16 July 2009) 'to prohibit mineral exploration and mining operations at headwaters of rivers, protected zones of water reservoirs and forested areas, and to regulate rehabilitation activities carried out in the above-mentioned areas',[9] the mining is still legally allowed in the buffer zone of the Property. Mining licences – and ownership of mineral resources – are politically difficult and ambiguous issues, which also emerge in our field both during meetings with stakeholders and from documents. In the analysis and conclusion by the World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies in 2021, the presence of mining is noted and the decisions of the WH Committee welcome 'the confirmation that there is currently no mining exploration or exploitation activity within the boundaries of the property or its buffer zone and the commitment made by the State Party of Mongolia not to allow any future mining operation' (https://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/4258). The response can be read in Annex 13 of the Operational Guidelines 11 February 2022:[10]

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[8] We spent part of our fieldwork in June-July 2022 as guests in the *ger* of the elderly Buryat couple, Ariuntseg and Batsaikhan, together with their son and his family.

[9] Art. 1 of the 'Mongolian Law to prohibit mineral exploration and mining operations at headwaters of rivers, protected zones of water reservoirs and forested areas'. The economic, social and cultural impact of mining on the nomadic pastoralists of Mongolia is well documented: see the recent book by Sternberg et al. (2022).

[10] See https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/

> Mining is not allowed in Special Protected Areas (SPAs) and its buffer zones in Russia, while in Mongolia, it is only allowed in buffer zones, and only with prior approval from the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of Mongolia. A foreign mining company was running mining exploration in the WH buffer zone near the *sums* of Gurvanzagal and Dashbalbar in Mongolia, and as of 2018 all known mining exploration activities have been stopped. Mining is currently not occurring in the property but is seen as a potential danger as it is allowed in protected area buffer zones in Mongolia. As an assurance of the absence of mining in the future, the IUCN received a letter in July 2015, signed by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of Mongolia Deputy Minister of Environment, Green Development and Tourism of Mongolia, that guarantees that no mining operations in the WH property and its buffer zone would occur.

Thus in the 2023 UNESCO report, among the factors affecting the property we no longer find the mining activity in Mongolia; it is simply written that it is resolved.[11]

From Choibalsan going towards Dashbalbar – driving down the 'white roads' (dirt tracks) – for a long stretch we indeed flanked a railroad built for the transport of material extracted from a gold mine. Our Mongolian colleague, Ch. Tsetsegbaatar, says it is the property of a Malaysian multinational company: a wound that cut deep into the earth, just like this sky that meets our gaze, a sky – here in the northern part of the world – that seems immense, hanging low upon us.

The meeting with the chairman of the Culture and Arts Department of Dornod Province, held the day after, begins right with this last issue. After some pleasantries and expressing his absolute openness, the chairman in fact begins by saying that a fundamental goal is not to let companies into the Dauria – with their invasive activities – and that the mission of the Department is to help humans and nature equally.

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[11] See https://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/4335. On the other hand, the same document reports that the World Heritage Centre had received information from third parties concerning the approval of a gold mining prospecting licence on the headwaters and tributaries of Imalka River in the Russian Federation, in an area situated 900 meters from the border of the property in Mongolia.

As for the herders, his opinion is that the steppe's deterioration is due to climate change and the intense use of pastureland which increases especially in relation to the number of goats and horses. Regarding the former, the balance with the number of sheep seems to have completely changed even in these areas, since the sale of semi-finished cashmere to Chinese and Japanese companies constitutes an increasingly important revenue for family life and needs. Moreover, the breeding of racehorses – 'valuable' horses, as he defines them – is also flourishing. These animals, he says, 'contribute to raising the steppe conservation risk level'.

Figure 4 Railroad and train (@naMec)

Furthermore, the chairman connects these issues to the changes that have occurred in the families' way of life. In particular, he underlines that traditions and customs, even daily ones, are changing, like the scarce production of dairy products (and a higher consumption of meat) whose primary consequence is frequent dental problems in children, which barely existed before. According to the chairman, another example is the loss of the use of horses in pastoralism, replaced by motorcycles or cars.

These positions of the chairman seem to us to be in line with circulating discourses, on both a scientific and a public level, concerning the herders' responsibility in environmental degradation and the construct of a 'not-quite nomad'. These issues both come together in the construct of 'unsustainable pastoralism', which leaves room for interpretative and political ambiguity. The construct further seems to shift the focus and hierarchy of responsibility, reversing the range and the effects of the macrostructural factors (e.g. no welfare/healthcare policies, central or local government form agreements with multinational companies for soil and subsoil exploitation, etc.) relating to potential microscale strategies for dealing with uncertainties. Basically, the families' decisions for responding to climate change, market economies, and even to growing needs in children's education are undermined: 'Across regions, in many contexts, the policies put in place by national and regional governments have often tended towards dismantling or undermining the ability of pastoralists to follow traditional patterns of movement and govern common resources' (PASTRES, 2022, para. 3) The stereotype of pastoralism as 'backward, inefficient or unsustainable' persists.[12]

After his latest statements, we then ask the chairman – a little provocatively – how the herders are useful to the park, in addition to putting out fires. He then expresses another point of view, once again bringing out his own ambiguous positioning and contradictions, answering with simply, 'The herders are our wealth'.

We also deal with the issue of degradation during the third meeting with the mayor of Dalshbalbar. Concerning the deterioration of the environment, the mayor points out that there are foreign companies and affirms that just 45 km from the Park of Dauria's boundaries, there is a sprawling buckwheat plantation.

As to the possible contribution of the herders to the 'conservation' of the protected area, in line with our previous interlocutors, the mayor underscores the issue of fires – which, he is adamant, do not come just from within Russia's borders, but the Mongols are also responsible – and when the alarm sounds, everybody helps to put out the fire, even the public officials along with the herders, since there is only one firefighting squad in all of Dornod.

[12] For more on these issues, see (Bumochir, 2017; Fernández-Giménez, 2000; Nori, 2021; White, 2020).

1.3. 'FLUIDITY' AND MOBILITY RIGHTS

This last meeting with the mayor of Dalshbalbar offers us an additional narrative. He tells us that the government hasn't heard the herders' opinions: 'the government decided, so now there is conflict: the pastures are open, but the winter sites are owned by the herders', and there are comments saying that it's understandable that the herders don't want to leave. It's precisely for this reason that they get pressured and given fines which they don't pay, while they ought to, the mayor remarks. Therefore, the fundamental problem of friction, as far as legislation is concerned, doesn't seem to be so much the use of pastureland, of which the 'historical authenticity' of its usufruct ('traditional pastures') is protected as a right to access, as much as it is the stability of the winter sites, comprising non-mobile housing structures (see Figure 5), especially in part B of Mongol Daguur, which is more densely populated, as we stated above.

Regarding the winter sites, it's important to highlight that during socialist times the Buryats used wooden houses, and now they are among the most critical elements in the conflict with the park. Up until right before we were guests with one of the families in 2022, they even had a garden for the household economy, something quite common during socialism and for many years thereafter as well. Together with the Russian-style wagons (*мухлаг*, *mukhlag*), with or without wheels, these structures are scattered across the area leaving traces of a history of transformation in the relationship with the steppe environment.

Figure 5 Wooden houses and wagons (@naMec)

However, while their relatives living in the Aga district (in Russia) even after the Soviet regime ended, had maintained a collective organization similar to the *negdel* – the *kholkhoz* of the rest of Asia under the URSS – through cooperatives (see Humphrey, 1998; Marchina, 2021), the families from our area of reference soon went back to an 'autonomous' nomadic way of life with seasonal camps through multiple strategies. Some left one of the two *gers* of the summer camp to move with just one during the fall; others moved the *ger* that is set up next to the house at the winter site; in recent years. Another family decided to move a few kilometres closer to the village than the summer site they had used up until then, more towards the mountains on the Russian border, to have 'a cell phone signal, even though it's spotty' (Batzorig, August 2022). Yet others dispersed over various kilometres during the winter and summer, only to reunite with a part of the extended family at the fall site (*otor,* from September to November). This was the case

for Tomorbaatar, a healer and 'white' shaman like his father and his father's father, and the family of one of his sons, Batbayar, where we were guests (see also further on).[13] Also close to the latter, because of friendship and financial ties linked to horse breeding, a family with non-Buryat ethnic origins pitched its summer camp. It developed its own livestock management that lives off the clan's collaboration during the winter, thus allowing the mother to move to the village of Chuluunkhoroot (*sum*) to take care of her younger children who have to go to school[14].

These examples give an idea of the fluidity which has always been a cornerstone of nomad group culture. A fluidity that historically, and in different settings, takes shape following many strategies, and that often has a difficult relationship with the state authority. For example, this last family continues to keep the winter field in the Mongol Daguur part A (from the vantage point of 'our' *gers*, beyond and to the north of the Ulz River) and he brings us up to speed on these itineraries without any sign of taking the zoning of the park into consideration.

In fact, this zoning and more broadly the conservation approach that generated it goes back to an ontology based on the nature-culture dichotomization, extraneous to the relationships characterized by interdependency and entanglement (Tosi Cambini, 2024) inherent to the nomads immersed in the steppe and under the heavens. In this sense, the politics and policies that govern the parks intersect, influence, and transform the complex triadic human-animal-environment relationship (see Marchina, 2021), in ways that are hard to predict.

After all, as Brockington (2015) pointed out, 'fortress conservation is also an ideal. Behind it lies the concept that nature and people should be separated, either because people (or at least the wrong sort of people) are too dangerous to be allowed to be part of the landscape, and/or because the idealized perfect landscape is simply conceived to be a "wilderness", a place without people […]. Fortress conservation is therefore the physical, sometimes violent, creation of these landscapes' (p. 2).

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[13] Tomorbaatar's eldest son, Gantulga, practises *otor* in spring, too, for about a month and a half, and the choice of pastureland in this case is closely linked to the fact that there is less snow.

[14] It is worthy of note that this woman, Tsengelmaa, obtained her degree in Forestry Sciences in Choibalsan and participated in the recent selection to be appointed Park Ranger.

Figure 6. Fieldwork: Summer camps and springs (@naMec)

Having heard from Ariuntseg and Batsaikhan's family of the existence of a form of herder representation, we ask the mayor about it, especially in relation to potential petitions by herders regarding the request to move. He answers that there is a delegation (*нөхөрлөл*, *nökhörlöl*), 'but it doesn't work well, it's not effective, while before [during socialism] it worked well', and after a bit, he adds, 'Each family sees to itself.' In this sense, we notice an interpretation that doesn't seem to consider the sophisticated mechanisms of regulation of decision-making powers, and therefore, of the power of the nomad families networks and even the emic interpretations one can give on the intra-and inter-clan relationships.[15]

[15] In one of our conversations, Tomorbaatar affirms that the *nökhörlöl* (*нөхөрлөл*) is not currently active since there is a certain mutual distrust between the Buryats; there is a 'bad genealogy', having gone through hard times (having been subject to persecutions at several points in time).

The 'nomads' are immersed in large spaces and the sounds of silence. The *gers* are circular points in a way of human life that nourishes itself and is made up of the ongoing relationship with the nonhuman. Mobility and dispersion are two fundamental aspects which change their relationship in the quest for a balance between exploitation activities and herding space, which plays out in a sophisticated relationship between the autonomous family unit and social organization. And it is precisely this, one of the aspects that in our eyes as 'frequenters' of nomads, comes out the most. Besides the traditional passion for family genealogy (see Turri, 2003) – which we know to have been central both in the continuance of shamanism in Dornod during the socialist period (Buyandelger, 2013) and in its even urban revival, and in many other 'identity-making' postsocialist processes in Mongolia – we saw very strong communal and solidarity practices at play, both in cases of the festivity and in the management of livestock as well as for raising children. The most important example of the former case was the rehearsals leading up to *Naadam* in which networks of families linked by familial and/or 'neighbourly' ties participated, and we got the chance to attend for two years straight. We, too, were swept away by the people's excitement about the preparations and the races. Here is a deep moment where the social ties woven between the families that practise horse breeding in our area of focus are plain to see. As soon as they are old enough, children participate directly in training the animal and in the races. At times, the children from one family ride horses from another, if the horse's owner doesn't have children that are of an age suited to the animal. In Figure 6 below we can see the map of the spatial location of these families' summer camps, which Batbayar drew in 2022; it was completed the following year by his friend Timur who lives in his *ger* on the other bank of the Ulz, with indications of the repositioning of some of them.

Although it's not possible to dig deeper herein, it's important to at least mention this emic element connected to time and genealogy.

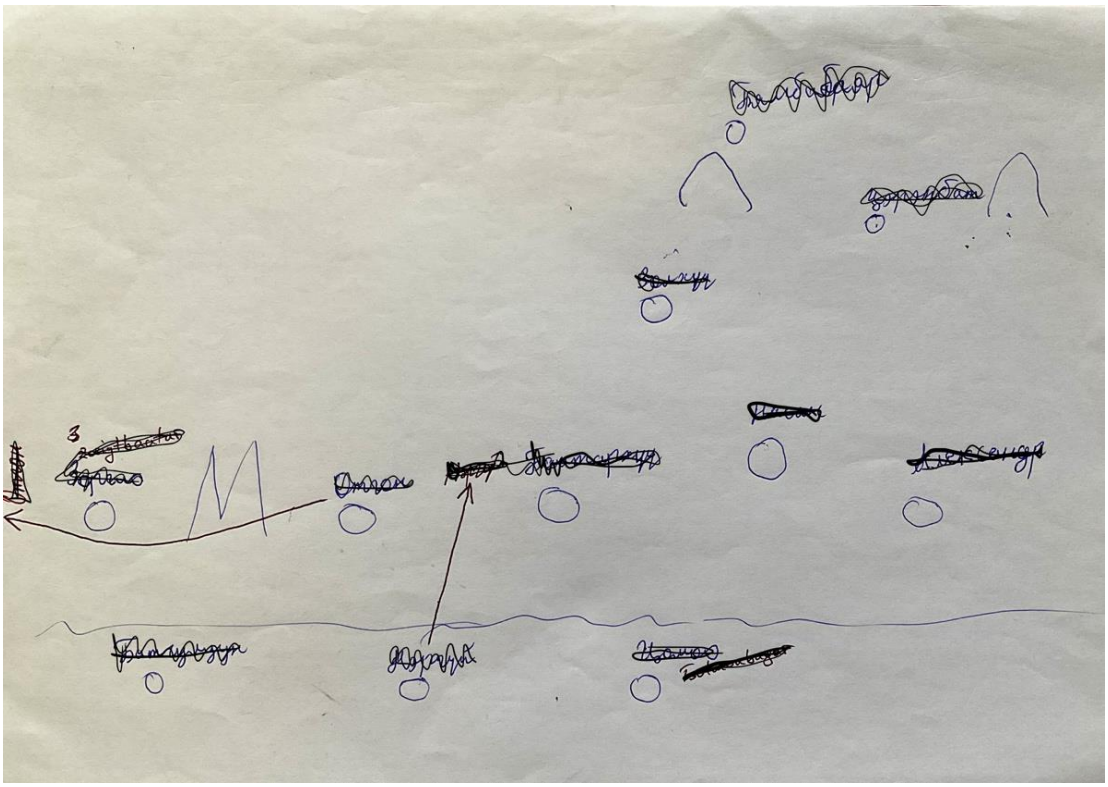

Figure 7. Map drawn by Batbayar and Timur, with people's names crossed out to respect their anonymity (@naMec)

Concerning the management of the herds, we witnessed mutual aid at different times, the most challenging of which is the washing of the sheep and goats in the Ulz River. Instead, regarding child-rearing, we became acquainted with an 'adoption' case where when the parents died, the children were taken in by the brother – the eldest and married – of one of the two deceased parents, into the family fold. The eldest two, now independent, live in the capital; the two youngest (school age) are really good at everything that has to do with the herding world, and especially at caring for 'valuable' horses (to borrow the words we cited above). Nyamzhargal, the eldest of the two, spoke to us about his desires one evening. In front of a seemingly endless sunset, near the horses tied to a pole and a well, he tells us that once he finishes school in Chuluunkhoroot, he wants to join his older brother in Ulaanbaatar "to study at college like he did." Nyamzhargal knows very well how to lead flocks, look after horses, he loves riding in the

steppe and during the *Naadam* etc; and at the same time he wishes to study in the capital. Here it is useful to return to the meeting with the mayor of Dashbalbar. To our question on changes that he notes in the generations of the inhabitants of the territory he governs, the mayor points out that many young people emigrate abroad; for example, his son now lives in France together with his wife, and 'maybe my grandson won't know anything about Mongolia, maybe 20 years from now they won't remember. The culture,' he goes on, 'will certainly change, but we must decide how', and he glosses over it, adding that 'the herders don't want to teach their children how to be herders because it's a hard, insecure job. They send their children to the city to study.' The mayor simplifies the processes, flattens them and applies a dichotomizing vision between rural and urban, between an idea of 'tradition' and one of 'modernization'.

The transformation of the life of the herders, their customs, needs and desires, becomes intelligible by staying with them, perceiving their internal contradictions, seeking to understand their very efforts in bestowing 'continuity in the change' and 'change in the continuity'. Between what they have known since a time that is lost over generations – an embodied knowledge – and instead what they have learned so recently in an uncertain way and which they make various uses of – is a knowledge that can also turn out to be inadequate and approximate.

Among the families, and even in each family, there are different speeds and variances, but it would be mistaken for an outside gaze to place these changes on a scale of value between 'tradition' and 'modernization'. If we take note of some behaviours that make us wonder – like using soap to wash in the waters of the river or a young family in the steppe not producing cheese – we must be able to tie the influx of urbanization to the strategies the families adopt, without falling into the role of the nostalgic observer of 'pure nomads' or using stereotypical categories; rather, the contradictions that emerge from the field must be explored in their complexity.

Tsengelmaa, who we mentioned previously, embodies a paradigmatic example of the complexities at play, which trace original interconnections between ways of life, changes and aspirations. In fact, Tsengelmaa usually moves with her family to Mongol Daguur B for the winter camp, has a degree in Forestry Sciences and had applied for the vacant position of park ranger. The interconnections between the steppe and the city (for many, even represented by the *sum* village) must be understood and considered fundamental in

order to support policies – in this case, those regarding the so-called 'protected areas' – in creating contexts of the herders' real participation. All those we interviewed (manager, chairman, mayor and rangers) recognize this participation as essential, but in our research experience, we've neither seen it seriously researched nor even implemented, so that the policy-makers and herders can explore knowledge and practices together. However, this exchange should be based on a fundamental starting point: the questioning by at least the local authorities of the absolute necessity of moving families and the recognition of their knowledge and strategies. This is closely linked to a necessary decolonization of the patterns of thinking and storytelling, so that the authorities are able to emerge from the dominating colonialist separation from the environment, and, obviously, from economic colonization.

In the evening, our camp immerses itself in the *giingoo* (*cuŭnzoo*), the song of the children on horseback, which echoes like a whisper in the resounding silence of the steppe, like a breath among the other breaths. And sometimes, stunned by the immensity of the places experienced, we find peace.

2. THE SOCIAL LIFE OF WATER IN DORNOD *AIMAG*

In Mongol Daguur, the manifold forms of water compose a complex *social life of water* (Wagner, 2013), where water is closely linked with ecology, culture, society, the economy, politics, the imagination and narrations. As Wagner (2013) illustrates, water is not only a biologically vital element but it is also shaped and reshaped by humans, in that it is capable of agency, itself a producer of an 'immense variety of ways in which social practices are shaped' (p. 3). Water, like humans, is 'simultaneously social and ecological, not just as one or the other' (p. 5). At the same time, the current water crisis involves every region in the world and even affects Mongolia; it has to do with commodification, urbanization, technological changes and the differences in the governance (Wagner, 2013).

Following the indications given by Wagner, which represent the anthropological approach that we wanted to adopt, we have attempted to highlight various features of the social life of water present in this environment and to observe them within the naturalistic conservation practices of the place.

We have sought to extend our gaze at the environment in a broader manner than is shown by the documents concerning the establishment of the protected areas, which are too focused on certain spectacular features of the landscape. In this, too, conservation risks being a 'fortress', because it always draws attention to the same sensational features of the landscape: in the case of Mongol Daguur, it is the wetlands, the Mongolian gazelle, the migratory birds and birdlife of exceptional importance that are highlighted.

We can list many other aquatic elements present in Mongol Daguur, and each of them is deeply significant in the lives of the nomadic herders, for humans and nonhumans. In short, they are:

- the freshwater lakes used for watering the flocks
- the saltwater lakes, used by the herders to give the livestock the minerals considered important for their flock
- the great Ulz River, which we will describe at length, with its adjacent wetlands majestically surrounding it (Figure 8)
- many other smaller wetlands disseminated throughout the territory
- the springs (see section 2.2)
- the wells from which drinking water is drawn. The herders call them 'Russian wells' because they are thought to have been built in the Soviet period (Figure 9)
- the dam planned for the Onon/Ulz rivers, to which we will dedicate subsection in this article (see section 2.3)

Figure 8. Wetland of the Ulz River. (@naMec)

Focusing on the subject of the social life of water, we found the same social dynamics and the same criticalities that we highlighted in the first part of this contribution on the management of the protected areas: a confused overlapping of legislation, practices and theories that leads to an overlapping of formal and informal collaboration and practices and to a contradictory approach to the local use of natural resources. At the same time, however, our anthropological approach has enabled us to observe a little more closely the social life of water in relation to the herders with whom we were living.

2.1 WETLANDS AND SPRINGS: THE STRANGE RELATIONSHIP

The wetlands are an emerging point in the life of water in this steppe region. In this section we shall see first the actions for the preservation of this important naturalistic feature and then the shift that is beginning to occur, moving our gaze from the wetlands to the springs. In the next section (section 2.2), we will look at the political management of the drought in this area and the answers that are provided in terms of the conservation of the areas in this province.

Yet study after study demonstrates that wetland area and quality continue to decline in most regions of the world. As a result, the ecosystem services that wetlands provide for people are compromised.[16]

Lately, there has been a major revival of the focus on wetlands, after their almost complete disappearance in many regions of the world at the end of the last century. The current turn that brought many states to recover, protect and restore their wetlands, both urban and rural (Minayeva et al., 2004; Parish et al., 2008), was defined as the 'wetland turn', started with the 'Ramsar Convention'.[17]

[16] Wetlands are vital for human survival; they are among the world's most productive environments, cradles of biological diversity that provide the water and productivity upon which countless species of plants and animals depend for survival. Desertification, loss of biodiversity, floods – all these phenomena worsening with climate change – find an effective, significant barrier in the wetlands and their multiple ecological functions. Wetlands are indispensable for the countless benefits or 'ecosystem services' that they provide for humanity, ranging from freshwater supply, food and building materials and biodiversity to flood control, groundwater recharge and climate change mitigation. See, for example, Wetland International (www.wetland.org)

[17] The Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971) is the intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. The Convention uses a broad definition of wetlands. This includes all lakes and rivers, underground aquifers, swamps and marshes, wet grasslands, peatlands, oases, estuaries, deltas and tidal flats, mangroves and other coastal areas, coral reefs and all human-made sites such as fish ponds, rice paddies, reservoirs and salt pans (see www.ramsar.org). At the centre of the Convention on Wetlands philosophy is the 'wise use' of wetlands. The Convention defines wise use of wetlands as 'the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development'. Wise use can thus be seen as the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands and all the services they provide, for the benefit of people and nature. See https://www.ramsar.org/about/the-wise-use-of-wetlands and the Ramsar Handbook 1, Wise Use of Wetland, 2010, Ramsar Convention Secretariat. There are currently over 2,400 Ramsar Sites around the world. They cover over 2.5 million square kilometres, an area larger than Mexico.

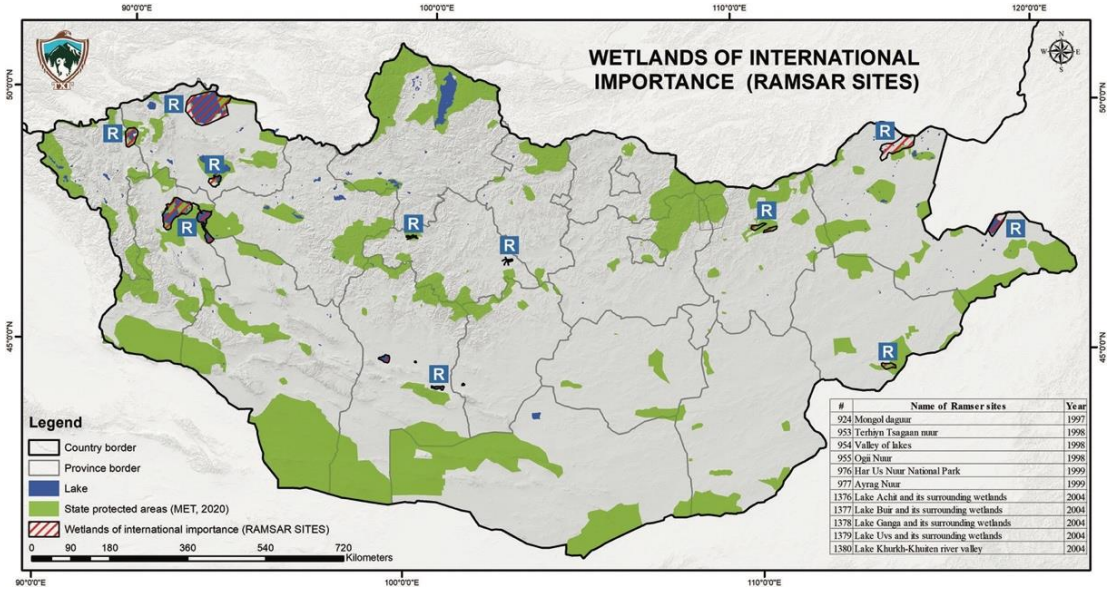

Figure 9. Wetlands of international importance - Ramsar sites in Mongolia (https://wwfasia.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/mongol_daguur_ramsar.pdf)

Mongolia participates in this 'wetland turn' too, with 11 wetlands registered in the Ramsar list,[18] one of which is exactly the area of Mongol Daguur,[19] along the Ulz River, where we conducted our fieldwork. As we see in the maps in Figure 10, the extension of the wetland Ramsar site partially overlaps the boundaries of the Mongol Daguur SPA.

[18] See https://www.ramsar.org/country-profile/mongolia

[19] Named Mongol Daguur Wetlands (Mongolian Dauria), depicted on the Ramsar information sheet on Dauria wetland in https://rsis.ramsar.org/RISapp/files/RISrep/MN924RIS.pdf. The site, including rivers, steppe and lakes, is located in the Ulz river basin. Mongol Daguur wetlands are the small-sized lakes in the Daurian Steppe and wetlands along the Ulz River, its surrounding areas in territories of Dashbalbar, Chuluunkhoroot and Gurvanzagal *sums* of Dornod province located in the north-east of Mongolia. See also Wetlands of International Importance Mongol Daguur https://asiapacific.panda.org/?371917/WETLANDS-OF-INTERNATIONAL-IMPORTANCE-MONGOL-DAGUUR; Mongolia's government also provides many other wetland protection experiments (Ganzorig, 2018; Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2017). I discussed this project in (Breda, 2024).

Figure 10. Overlapping of boundaries: Wetland Ramsar site and Mongol Daguur SPA (https://wwfasia.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/mongol_daguur_ramsar.pdf)

One of the core points of the wetland protection projects in Mongolia consists of fencing off the nucleus of wetland areas to protect them from being trampled by grazing animals – an effective measure, but also a disputed one, as we will see. In order to take a closer look at the benefits and the complications due to the practice of fencing wetlands, during fieldwork we began to ask the herders if they frequented them, and if they could take us to visit these places fenced off for water protection. So, by asking for information on the wetlands, which are more well known in the literature and in the government actions, we discovered the herders' hidden springs.

There is a strange relationship and a major difference between springs and wetlands. The latter were subject to international protection, reclamation and enhancement projects, besides being named as a constituent element of the UNESCO World Heritage Site 'Landscapes of Dauria' in Dornod *aimag*. Springs, instead, are not mentioned, nor are they described or catalogued. The spring called Delger (*дэлгэр),* the Delger Natural Spring, is the only one that we find cited in the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve Programme and Network. Yet, the springs are something that herders care greatly about, as can be easily noticed: for instance, for the *ovoo* often raised alongside them, for their position never overlooked by human habitations, for people's commitment to caring for the springs and for the care in choosing good wooden fences. Choices made about springs may be varied and contrasting among the different ethnic groups over the territory of the Daurian Landscape, as we'll see later on.

Inspired by naturalist western-centric criteria, the wetlands protection projects were partially inspired also by the local herders' recent practice of 'fencing off' water sources. In fact, the springs had already been spontaneously fenced off by the herders in recent years, while the government's (local or national) interventions came only later, setting metal fences, which have been criticized and at times even bent or destroyed. The herders found the government project less effective than their own solutions. We'll take a closer look at these practices which often clash, since they originate from different ontologies and different aims.

It is well known that the practice of building permanent fences, fixedly stuck in the ground, is not part of nomadic culture in Mongolia. Making holes in the ground, drawing maps on the sand, digging like miners do, all these actions are considered aggressive practices which show a lack of respect for the spirit of the earth (as the soil is considered its face) and are to be avoided. How then, should we consider these fences around the wetlands and the springs? This is what we have sought to comprehend.

2.2 THE FOUR SPRINGS OF MONGOL DAGUUR

We acknowledged the existence of the first spring while visiting Batbayar's father, the herder who hosted us in 2023. Tomorbaatar, as we saw previously, is a herder, nomad and shaman. He travels around with three *gers* in different campsites and owns an *ovoljoo*

(winter camp) and a wooden winter house. He practices the *otor* for three months, at a distance of 100 km from the summer camp, which he crosses in two days. During the *otor*, he reaches his son, towards the blue mountain (*Khokh Uul*, *хох уул*), or towards the blue lake (*Khokh Nuur*, *хох нуур*), very close to the Russian border. These areas, until late autumn, are still very grassy, as the territory is bowl-shaped and low, and the conch shelters it from nighttime frost. There, his herd can graze intensely before winter with the 'pushing' technique that is the *otor*, which some authors deem extinct in other areas of Mongolia (Humphrey and Sneath 1999) but in this area is still practised today, certainly by Tomorbaatar and even by his *ger* neighbours, according to their accounts.

During our long afternoon talk, we ask if there are springs in this area. We talk with him and his daughter-in-law, joined by a herding helper and two other friends. We find out that there is a spring nearby. They describe it and are excited as they talk about it. The conversation gets lively while discussing how it was fenced. We go to visit it, moving towards an open landscape with slightly higher hills, in the vastness of the northeastern Mongolian steppe, a type of landscape called *shand* (*шанд*). We spot the spring bubbling in the midst of a large, partially intact fence. It is called *Shand bulag* (*шанд булаг*); it is in the third *bag* (district), near Zagal mountain (*загал уул*).

The water seems murky and, in some places, muddy. The source of the spring branches out into a small brook where animals drink, as we can see from their hoofprints. A wooden and concrete fence, broken down in some points, is in turn surrounded by an iron fence. A metal plaque states the place, date and other information about this project. Our interlocutors explain that the government reinforced the fence some years earlier with this iron structure: a low railing with pointed stakes. And here lies the reason for the conflict: the iron fence is too low, and some horses, trying to reach the fresh spring water, jumped over it and hurt their bellies (a lethal kind of injury). Herders disdain this iron structure. While it looks like an imitation of the wooden structures that herders themselves built around the springs, its rigid iron structure feels like a forced project rather than a shared and requested one. That is why some parts of it have been damaged. The interview with our guests reveals the reasons for its inadequacy: losing valuable horses because of a fence is unacceptable. Nevertheless, the spring's source seems much loved by our guests, who show it proudly to us, and invite us to have a drink.

Figure 11a-b. Spring with fences at the first spring visited (@naMec)

Figure 12. Plaque's text: Financed and implemented with funding for environmental protection and restoration by the Province. Client: Provincial Governor's Office. Contractor: Joron LLC 2020. (@naMec)

In the second spring we visited, bubbly water gushes from the light sandy soil as if it is boiling. The water is extremely clear and abundant. Some rocks that look like alabaster and precious minerals are scattered around in the moist soil, as a stone path leading us to the heart of the spring. Near Lake Gurvan (*гурваны нуур*), this *higher* spring is called Gurvan Deed (*гурваны дээд*), since it is part of a long string of springs and waterways. In fact, the springs that come after this one are called middle – *dund* (*дунд*) – and lower – *dood* (*доод*) – spring. The spring area is vast, and the water branches out in a deep brook that becomes a stream not far from the spring. This waterway crosses large expanses of steppe, and we followed it, the next day, towards the middle spring. We won't see the third (lower) spring during this fieldwork.

Regarding the second (middle) spring, the one that we managed to visit and analyse, we found very important elements for an anthropological study. First, a long wooden

fence acts as a boundary for a vast area around the spring. It has incorporated the spring, wells, wetland areas, fields and streams, but it's mostly run-down, the stakes are on the ground, the barbed wire that should work as a barrier is tangled on the ground. The spring seems abandoned, the maintenance inexistent, and the scrap-iron and wood pieces are what stand out the most.

Figure 13. Area of second spring (@naMec)

A few days later, we return to the second spring and find groups of horses gathered above the spring source and where most of the water collects. It is clear that the extensive fence was built precisely to prevent this circumstance, just as it is clear that the horses are able to freely access to the best water they can find at the site.

Figure 14. Second spring. It is also possible to see a ger in the distance, located at a higher height

Figure 15. Groups of horses gathered above the second spring source (@naMec)

In this area, we also see a dead cow carcass in a waterway. Along the waterways gushing out from this spring, we see bones and skulls along the water stream.

Figure 16 (a) A dead cow carcass in a waterway of the second spring; (b) A bone in a waterway of the second spring (@naMec)

We strike up a discussion with our interlocutors. They tell us that this cow has been dead for a while and that the herders who live nearby have left it there 'due to laziness'. Indeed, there is a *ger* on the hill that overlooks the spring (see Figure 14). Since it is located higher than the spring, it is not well-liked by our interlocutors. According to 'tradition' and to the shared opinion of our interlocutors, you do not respect a spring when you put human things up above it. Both spiritual and practical issues overlap in this case: beyond the symbolic position, the physical position of the *ger* can pollute the spring with its waste from everyday activities. This, together with the dead animal in the water that does not get removed earns these herders the label of 'lazy' (*zalkhuu*, *залхуу*).

But from another point of view, the situation can be analysed differently: rather than laziness, it's about the fact that these herders belong to a different ethnic group than the Buryat we are interacting with, and to them, whatever the earth takes, appropriating it through death – like this animal – belongs to the earth, it is owed to it, and must not be removed (if you remove the cow's carcass, the earth could take another one in its place).[20]

Some days later, Batbayar's brother, Gantulga, takes us at the middle spring, the third one we visit, along with his little son Jochi. Here, too, we find the spring surrounded by a solid, blue-and-white iron fence. We ask Gantulga if the herders care about this project, if they feel it is useful. The answer is an action: our interlocutor was just starting to adjust the slightly bent directions sign, fix the iron fence, repair the iron wire, pick up a few poles – to do maintenance, so to speak. The child filled the bottle and we tasted the spring water.

[20] This is the explanation that our Mongol colleague gave us.

Figure 17. The third spring (@naMec)

The fourth spring is called Delger (*дэлгэр)*; [21] we get to know it through the report, the pictures, and the information sent to us by the park ranger we speak with one afternoon at Batbayar's *ger*. The ranger can't take us to visit it right now, but he speaks enthusiastically about it with us, and he'll make sure to keep us updated. It is located in protected zone 'A' of Mongol Daguur, it, too, fenced off with the wooden stakefence; it rises near a large *ovoo*.[22] The ranger underscores that the stakefences are structures that the herders have begun to make over the past decade, to protect the part where the water comes out and forms the spring, which would otherwise be trampled and used by the herds, which instead should use the waterways that branch off from the spring and that usually are sufficient for watering.

[21] The Delger Natural Spring is the only spring that we find cited in the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve Programme and Network (Namkhai, 2021).

[22] Even an urban spring that we saw in the outskirts of the capital was honoured with a nearby *ovoo*, as well as protected and made accessible to the local people by a small bridge covered by a decorative roof.

The ranger tells us that the spring in zone 'A' was fenced off with wood in an agreement between park and herders; they did it together, so that they could follow the local practices.

Figure 18 a-b. The fourth spring in Mongol Daguur A (@naMec). Near this spring there is an ovoo

In the four cases of springs identified, the difficult collaboration between herders and administrators is evident in the administration of the environment when the latter is no longer only a 'life environment' but becomes an 'environment to be preserved'. The fencing off of the spring reveals an overlapping of actions and counteractions that trigger conflict, although all the parties share the same purpose of preserving the springs.

2.3 THE DROUGHT CYCLE AND THE RESPONSES AT LOCAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL: THE DAM ON THE ONON/ULZ RIVERS

The topic of increasing droughts, these past decades, in the northeastern steppe of Mongolia is a matter of great concern for ecologists, administrators and herders. The region's aquifer has shrunk, so that today the possibility of obtaining water is diminished and the herders are not given help to maintain and restore the sides of the wells, while the planning of big dams absorbs the attention and finances of the state, with an imposing impact. The lakes appear to be drying up, some of them reduced to an expanse of sand and salt. In the Ulz River, a resource for many actions by the herders, with the introduction of the protection of naturalistic areas, fishing is now prohibited, thus depriving the scarce local population of a precious resource for a varied diet.

In the face of the increasing drought in the last 30 years in this territory, the herders' efforts to respond to the drought cycle has emerged with the protection of the springs, while the larger wetlands, like those surrounding the Ulz River, remain in the background in the herders' daily lives, utilized, but hardly manipulated and protected instead by international projects, as we have seen. We discussed it many times with our interlocutors, herders in the steppe, who substantially confirmed this trend of long-standing drought in the steppe, which ended not long ago with the return of copious rain and rise in the water level in lakes and rivers. According to the Buddhist-inspired calendar consulted by Ariuntseg, the herder who hosted us the previous year, 2022 was the year of the 'water tiger', and as such it wasn't a dry year.

The UNESCO (2022) Report on the State of Conservation of the Russian Federation of the UNESCO World Heritage Site 'Landscapes of Dauria' considers drought a natural factor affecting the OUV of the site and illustrates the consequences of this 30-year drought cycle on the environment:

> Key natural hazards and limiting factors for the biodiversity of the Site are associated with unfavorable periods of long-term climatic cycles lasting about 30 years. Fluctuations in the water content of wetlands during long-term climatic periods most strongly affect the populations of animal and plant species closely related to this type of land. […] At the peak of dry periods, there is a sharp decrease in the number or complete disappearance of these animal and plant species, primarily due to the extreme limitation or complete absence of wetlands suitable for their habitat. Such periods are critically difficult for the survival of populations of rare species. The final phases of dry periods are especially difficult when the area of habitable places is repeatedly reduced, the food base deteriorates, and, in addition, the pressure of many anthropogenic threats increases […] During the multi-year dry phase of the climate cycle, the area of wetlands on the Site in Dauria decreased in the period from 2000 to 2019. At the end of 2019, the filling of the Torey Lakes and many other wetlands of the Site began, accompanied by an increase in the biodiversity, biological productivity and global significance of the Site for migratory bird species. Thus, at present, the ecosystems of the Site are experiencing changes characteristic of the initial stage of long-term wet climatic period. (p.4)

As to the importance of the alternation of dry and humid spells, the UNESCO World Heritage Convention 'Landscapes of Dauria' online documentation confirms that the 'biodiversity of this region depends on the natural cyclical flow regimes and large variations in water levels. Cyclical climate changes, with distinct dry and wet periods, lead to a wide diversity of species and ecosystems of global significance'.[23] It is within this drought cycle that the local responses of these past years, of both the environmentalists and the herders, seem to fall under and consist of wetlands area protection, and in more spontaneous spring protection by herders, as we have seen. Even the state project on the Onon/Ulz is a national and international response to drought.

[23] https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1448/

Depending on the approach to the social life of water, different levels of technological presence can be seen in this environment: the wetlands are *hyper-objects* whose protection goes beyond the nomadic herders' perception. They use wetlands, rivers and lakes in their daily farming practice (watering and cleaning the livestock), with the technical interventions that we analysed in section 2.2. The wells only partially function today, and the herders do not possess the technology to repair them, whereas no administrative initiative is taken to put them back into operation.

Figure 19. A well in use in Mongol Daguur (@naMec)

The dam, on the contrary, is clearly a matter of enormous impact and in which the high level of technology necessary for its planning and construction exclude the local populations and place them only at the end of the process as the recipients of the consequences. Consequences that, we now see, would negatively affect humans and nonhu-

mans in the protected areas and for whom a necessary assessment of the environmental impact is requested.

The Report on the State of Conservation of the Russian Federation of the UNESCO World Heritage Site 'Landscapes of Dauria' (2021) expressed great concern about the construction of the dam over the Onon/Ulz:

> The creation of a reservoir and the combination with flow regulation regimes and irreversible water intake can lead to a significant change in the natural hydrological regime of the Uldza[24] River and the Torey Lakes and, as a result, to irreparable negative consequences for the ecosystems of the Torey Lakes and the lower reaches of the Uldza River within the site boundaries of the Site (p. 1).[25]

The study of this dam construction process was also part of our fieldwork, concerning which we can briefly sum up the terms of the question. The dam on the Onon and Ulz rivers, built a few kilometres north of the UNESCO Site's property, ideally came about precisely to fight the effects of drought in this region. Located 24-28 km upstream of the Ugtam Nature Refuge component of the property, the construction of the dam began in July 2020. According to its proponents, the dam is being built to regulate the water supply of the Ulz River, create a reservoir to be used during droughts, and maintain a stable ecological balance. The State Party of Mongolia foresees no long-term negative impact on the OUV of the property resulting from the project. However, in 2021 and

[24] Russian name of the Ulz River

[25] Specifically, the document reports: 'Background research has shown that the implementation of the project [of the dam] is likely to result in serious irreversible negative changes in the state of the Outstanding Universal Values of the Site, especially during the dry phases of the climate cycle. During the wet phase of the climate cycle, the regulating value of the dam will have an insignificant effect on the flow (no more than 3% of the river flow), but the operation of the reservoir in the dry phase will lead to catastrophic environmental and socio-economic consequences in the lower reaches of the Uldza River and on the Torey Lakes. Significant water losses will be associated with its evaporation from the surface of the reservoir. It is also supposed to take a significant amount of water from the reservoir for irrigation of nearby fields. In the dry phases of climatic cycles, this will lead to a decrease in the water resources of the Torey Lakes by 23–45% and to a 2–4-fold increase in the duration of the drying periods of the lakes' (p.1).

2022, the reports of analysis of the State of Conservation (SOC) of the Site's environment, drawn up by the Russian Federation and Mongolia, respectively, condemn the negative impacts that would materialize in the Park's ecosystems with full construction of the dam over the two rivers. The reports inform against the lack of an environmental impact assessment of the engineering work, and the lack of involvement of the parties that live in the Park (human and nonhuman, herders and wild fauna and flora) that would experience the consequences.

It is precisely on the hypothesis of what the consequences of this major work would be that the Report on the State of Conservation of the Russian Federation of the UNESCO World Heritage Site 'Landscapes of Dauria' (UNESCO, 2022) is the most incisive: the assessment should take full account of the impact on the wetlands of the World Heritage site and the Ramsar Convention, and avoid violations of international law, and 'it is proposed to stop/suspend the implementation of these projects and conduct a comprehensive transboundary impact assessment' (UNESCO, 2022, p.3). The document, drawn up by the Russian side of the Park, shows the potential negative effects of the dam on the three nations involved in the Park (i.e. Mongolia, Russia and China), looking at the effects that would fan out up to Lake Baikal, to the Lena zone, to the Amur region, and even farther off, on Australia, a part of the Northeastern migratory route of Dauria's birds, the Asian/Australian migratory route.

In short, the report (UNESCO, 2022) reveals how the Ulz River, the river of our fieldwork in Dornod, is closely linked to the Russian region, through a tie that has influenced not just the Torey[26] lakes, a part of the Park, but up to the Baykal Lake region, the Amour region, so extensively throughout Northeast Asia and to Australia. It states that in September 2020, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of Russia sent a letter to the Mongolian side with a request to submit research results confirming the safety of the project for the ecological state of the Uldza River and the Torey Lakes and conduct research on the impact of regulating the Uldza River flow (MPR) on the biological diversity of the transboundary Daurian ecoregion. The report further underlined the following:

[26] Russian name of the Tari Lakes.

> The effect of the project will also be manifested in a drop in the groundwater level in the Torey basin, a decrease in water quality for the local population, an increase in the duration of low-water and waterless periods of the Torey lakes, [and] a decrease in fish stocks, which is of great importance not only for maintaining colonies of fish-eating bird species but also for the local population. (p. 2)

Overall, within this document, the Site's authorities request suspension of the plans for construction of the Onon-Ulz Dam (UNESCO, 2022).

In 2023, the State of Mongolia declared that it had stopped the work, awaiting assessment of the environmental and social impact of the dam. The State Parties of the Russian Federation and Mongolia submitted separate SOC reports on 1 and 11 February 2022, respectively[27] and provided the following updates: The State Party of Mongolia confirms that the Onon-Ulz Dam project has been suspended and that no activity will be implemented until an environmental impact assessment (EIA) for the project, which was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is conducted.[28]

CONCLUSIONS

This article is a discussion on Mongol Daguur, in the Dornod *aimag*, and conflict over the establishment, management and redrawing of its boundaries, in an environment where there are many different stakeholders and different competing interests in the management of the area. We discussed the bureaucratic and ontological presupposition of landscape 'integrity' in this protected area, presented in the documents as a 'whole' landscape, in which the human presence of nomadic herders and their flocks is sometimes tolerated because it is a historical presence, sometimes considered insignificant to the extent of having allowed the ecological integrity of the landscape to be maintained, sometimes considered harmful as it causes fires, poaching, illegal hunting or over-pasturing, to the point of wishing that it be sent elsewhere and expelled.

[27] See available at https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1448/documents/
[28] See https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/8292

The conflicts between herders and a long series of presences (like national and international regulations, mines, rail lines cutting the steppe, fires, the fencing of springs, the dam, etc.) deconstruct the presumed 'integrity' of 'Landscapes of Dauria'.[29] Once more our research shows how 'intact landscapes' do not exist, and instead helps to bring out the network of players, points of view, ontologies and practices that comprise an inhabited landscape (Ingold & Pálsson, 2013) and are woven between humans and nonhumans.

Our fieldwork experiences show that there are competing ways of use and many overlapping protection regimes, which go from a weak solidarity with the herders to the accusation of 'unsustainable pastoralism'. As we highlighted in section 1, following the explanation by Bumochir Dulam, among others, *pastoralism* is taking on the same negative connotations of *nomadism*. The supposed backwardness of nomadism and the construction of unsustainability is transferred over to pastoralism. In this dynamic, environmentalism and policies for the conservation of nature of western inspiration have a responsibility: Bumochir holds that in the last two decades of the twenty-first century, in Mongolia 'the environmentalist approach to pastoralism has constructed an image of a harmful "unsustainable pastoralism" with negative effects on pasture and natural resources' (Bumochir, 2017, p. 21).

As Undargaa (2023) wrote, 'the State ought to have a specific role of providing an adequate legislative and executive framework to support more complex interdependent multi-scale pastoral institutions', but 'the State has assumed all management and financial authority while subjecting pastoralists to conflicting legislative and executive policies' (p. 265). In the midst of this recent ambiguity, the nomadic herders enact practices that seem to derive from a centuries-old ability to be fluid and react with always new multiple

[29] Our fieldwork shows that the real landscape isn't so very 'intact' as some documents describe it, but on the contrary tightly interwoven with relationships and presences. The Biosphere Reserve Program (Namkhai, 2021) itself doesn't inherently present landscape integrity as a requirement, and in fact anticipates a 'mosaic of ecological systems' that include 'a gradation of human interventions' (Article 4 of the Statutory Framework of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves). By contrast, the Ramsar criteria require that a site be 'natural or near-natural wetland'; the Mongol Daguur site was registered according to criteria 1-3, which refer to plant and animal species, but not humans. And the 'Landscapes of Dauria' World Heritage Site nomination, which does have an 'integrity' criterion, asserts that the site contains 'grassland and forest steppe landscapes which have suffered little from human disturbance'.

strategies, with the aim of maintaining their lifestyle in a changing world, and changing with it. The impact of the systems for preserving the protected areas on the lives of the nomadic herders is, however, hardly taken into consideration.

Pastoralism and preservation seem at some point to clash, as many cases in the literature have shown. Chatty and Colchester (2002) have clearly highlighted that the increased concern about the preservation of nature has been accompanied by the practice of sharply separating the protected areas from the outside world and from human presence, at the same time allowing abuse of the territory in the unprotected areas. This process has been accused of being clearly a top-down process, causing the displacement of local populations, inspired by western logics 'largely based on the assumption that the human actions negatively affect the physical environment' (p. 4). At the same time, it is scarcely critical of the real sources of the destruction of nature: 'social injustice, the lack of secure land tenure, the enclosure of the commons, consumerism, the rise of corporation, global trade, and government collusion or indifference' (p. 1). As we have seen, also in Mongolia there are now more laws on nature protection, and with them the already widely reported risks for other parts of the world, of the exclusion of the nomadic populations from their areas of origin, of seasonal mobility and of interest.

Research has also developed a deep insight into the social life of water, analysing the social life of springs, wetland, wells and a dam under construction; the conclusions that we can draw confirm the understanding of the process of overlapping, competing and top-down conservation that we have seen, where the laws of the protection of nature follow the processes of economic and political internationalization.

The push towards environmentalism inspired by the West (which, as we have pointed out from the beginning of the article, concentrates on the spectacular biodiversity and on the rarity of certain symbolic species, e.g. the Mongolian gazelle in our case) seems to have brought also to Mongolia many traits of 'fortress conservation' that, as shown by Brockington (2002), continues to have credit with many governments even though the counterproductive effects of this practice have been proven. Many international institutions are aware of the need to protect natural grasslands and rangelands and the rights of mobile Indigenous Peoples who conserve and depend on them for their physical and cultural survival. The United Nations has taken a number of actions that address the rights of mobile Indigenous Peoples including the adoption of resolutions on promoting

sustainable pastoralism and rangelands. In 2023, 'Transhumance, the seasonal droving of livestock' was inscribed on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage for Humanity; the General Assembly declared 2026 the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists; and the year 2024 was designated the International Year of Camelids, to promote awareness of the economic and cultural importance of camelids. Nonetheless, as underlined by United Nations documents:

> [P]astoralists and other mobile Indigenous Peoples who protect the biodiversity of rangelands through sustainable land use and livestock production face threats to their livelihoods and food security as lands become degraded and privatized. Mobile peoples commonly experience eviction and forced or induced sedentarization. Displacement can occur when States declare Indigenous Peoples' territories as empty or 'terra nullius' where there is no evidence of permanent human settlement. Due to this failure by States to recognize and respect their mobile lifestyles, mobile Indigenous Peoples face great barriers in accessing basic fundamental rights, including education, health care, and justice.[30]

The emphasis that we have placed in this article on the capacity to adapt, on flexibility and on the connection with nature on the part of nomads in protected areas should help to reverse these negative trends. The 'delay' compared with other countries, with which Mongolia has adopted the western naturalistic and conservationist positions, may easily and usefully turn into a great 'advantage' if the previous experiences of fortress conservation – already critically analysed – were to be taken into due consideration, at least enabling this area of Dornod to avoid the most extreme results of conservation, that being the displacement of herders from their areas of nomadization and the separation of areas of life from conservation areas. Mongolia may be successful in this area of the northeast and not repeat the same mistakes that other states have made or that have been made in other areas of Mongolia itself. As long as displacement and touristicization can be avoided, this area could develop and naturalistic conservation that is not a repetition of the colonialist practices antithetical to pastoralism and nomadism.

[30] See https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2024/call-inputs-mobile-indigenous-peoples.

Since the die has not yet been cast in this area, Mongolia may still have time to become the leader of a decolonized naturalistic conservation policy, and host a positive example, in Dornod, of 'without-fortress' conservation. For this reason, from our point of view Dornod can potentially become an area in which to take up the challenge of triggering local policies and practices in contrast with fortress conservation.

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