

Combination of tradition and contemporary knowledge lends a solution to Mongolian nomadic herders

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Conflict over state-owned pastureland and privately owned livestock has been a problem for Mongolia's rangeland management sector. The revitalisation of nomadic herders' traditional and collective rangeland-management practices is addressing this challenge.

Mongolia is one of the few countries in the world where nomadic herding is still widely practiced. There are about 150,000 herder families nationally, representing 30 percent of the country's 3 million population. They herd about 50 million head of five types of livestock (camels, horses, cattle/yaks, sheep and goats) on the nation's vast open rangelands that represent up to 70 percent - or 800 million hectares - of Mongolia's total territory.

Seventy percent of rangelands lie in dry and semi-dry zones, with annual rainfall averaging just 250mm. Herder families move 4 to 12 times each year between seasonal rangelands in winter, spring, summer and autumn. Such rotational grazing, which has long been a traditional herding practice, is essential for the sustainability of the land as it allows pastures to rest and rejuvenate. However, in the past two decades this practice has been increasingly ignored, which is largely the result of the absence of state regulations and growing herd numbers since livestock became the private property of herder families. This has had a profound environmental impact; according to a recent rangeland health assessment report jointly produced by Green Gold and the National Institute for Meteorology and Environmental Monitoring in May 2015, at present 65 percent of all rangelands has been degraded.

Since 2006, the Green Gold Project has been working to promote the sustainable use of rangelands in Mongolia. The main approach has been the promotion of collective actions among herder families who share common seasonal grazing lands. This includes: 1) The identification of, and agreement on, traditional grazing boundaries; 2) The revitalisation of an organisational culture among families who share access to common seasonal grazing lands; 3) The strengthening of cooperation; 4) The development of participatory rotational grazing plans; 5) The adoption of "rules for all" to enforce those plans; 6) The creation of Associations of Pasture-User Groups; and 7) The establishment of rangeland-use agreements between groups of herder families and local governments. Based on the Green Gold Project experience, the first three preparatory stages - essentially the creation of social capital - are critical, and can take up to three years to fully develop.

Cooperation among herder families can be difficult, particularly when they are on the move between seasonal rangelands and interaction is limited. Prior to the introduction of the centrally planned Soviet system 70 years ago, herders respected traditional rangeland rights, such as not violating neighbours' grazing boundaries without approval.

In order to restore traditional rangeland management practices and grazing boundaries, the Green Gold Project consulted extensively with herder communities to reach mutually acceptable agreements. When grazing boundaries were agreed upon, herder families were then encouraged to form groups and become more organised, including electing a community leader and holding regular meetings to interact and discuss any problems they may face.

To encourage such cooperation, the Green Gold Project created group Matching Funds to which each member contributes a designated amount of money (CHF 15 per family) that is then matched by the project. By September 2015, 60 percent of the more than 1100 established Pasture-User Groups, involving about 20,000 herder families, had created and were successfully maintaining Matching Funds. Monitoring of the initiative found that herder families used 60 percent of funds as small loans to bridge seasonal cash shortages to pay for basic family necessities, food and medical expenses, 15 per cent for transportation cost, 10 per cent for household maintenance and clothing, 10 percent for rangeland and herd management related investments, 5 percent to cover their children's education expenses.

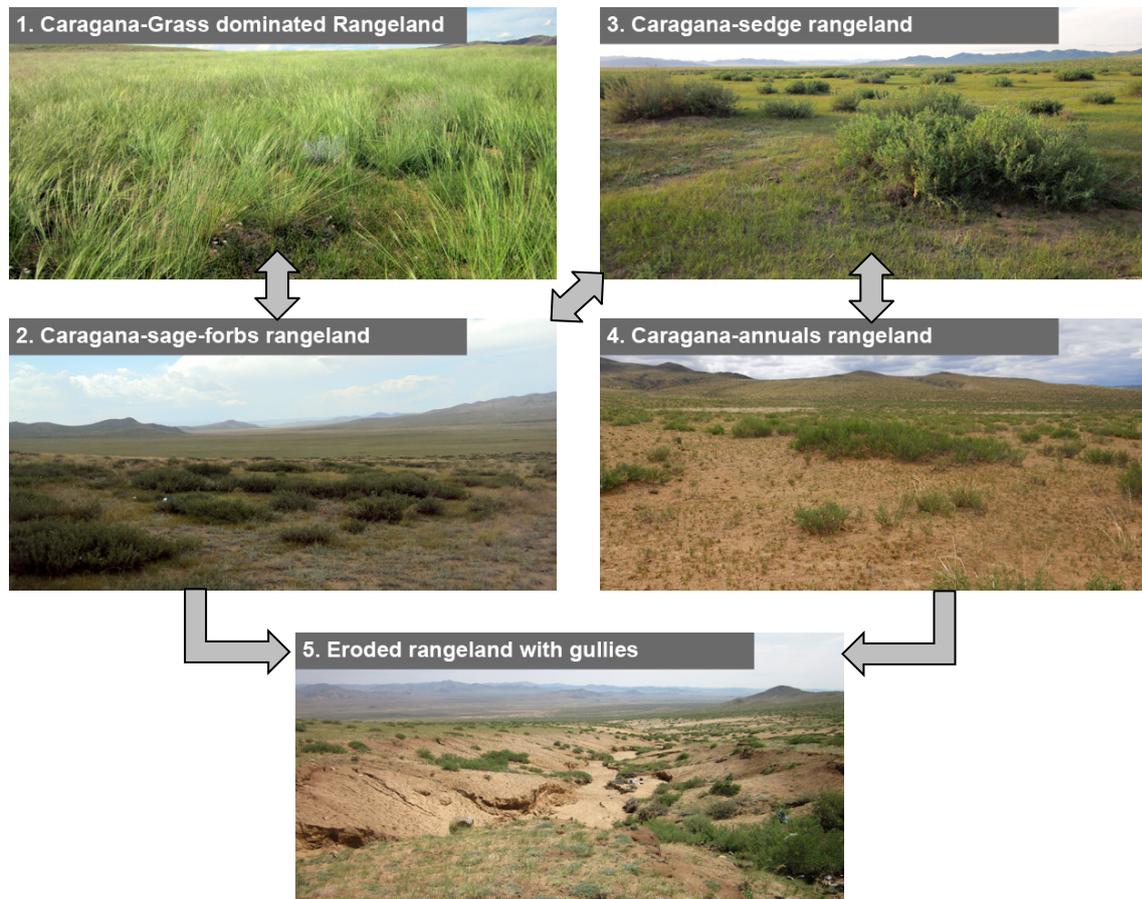
As group organisation and teamwork improve, participatory rotational grazing plans and the adoption of "rules for all" are then gradually introduced. (Picture 1: Herders devising grazing plans; Picture 2: Grazing plan). These steps take time to become internalised, generally up to two years, and at the

outset the project is heavily involved in helping to facilitate grazing plans and the adoption of rules; however, its role is eventually passed over to the Associations of Pasture-User Groups.



Having clearly defined plans and rules then enables herder groups to enter into rangeland-use agreements with local governments in accordance with current Mongolian land legislation. The role of local governments in rangeland-use agreements is to support herder groups in implementing rotational grazing plans and to monitor progress. The main objective underpinning rangeland-use agreements is the revitalisation of traditional rotational grazing practices. Results show that in the past six years 8.7 million ha of rangeland has been restored, and as of September 2015, about 500 Pasture-User Groups had entered into rangeland-use agreements with local governments.

Based on rangeland health indicators developed by the Green Gold Project and the National Meteorological and Environmental Monitoring Institute, from 2015 rangeland-use agreements were expanded to include herd stocking rates and rangeland health. Monitoring these variables involves visual representations of pastureland in its baseline state and its current state (Picture 3: State and Transition Model of rangeland changes).



As part of the expanded agreements, herder groups agree on step-by-step stocking rate reductions over a period of 5 to 10 years that do not decrease annual family incomes, which primarily involves the destocking of 5-8 percent of old and unproductive animals.

The condition of rangelands is assessed and agreed upon by herder groups and local governments, and rangeland health is monitored annually by local land managers. Possible next steps are that those herder groups who maintain rangeland health are entitled to government support such as targeted subsidies, while those who degrade the land are subject to penalties and fees, the latter of which is used for rangeland rehabilitation.

The expanded rangeland-use agreements are currently being tested in eight Pasture User Groups in cooperation with the State Agency for Land Affairs, Geodesy and Cartography. There is also scope for further development, with the agreements forming the basis of the development of natural rangeland based products and the introduction of a quality traceability system.

Conclusions

The main outcome is that rangeland-use agreements have become a platform upon which herder families and local governments are able to discuss and agree upon mutual responsibilities aimed at improving rangeland health.

Since 2014, in cooperation with the State Agency for Land Affairs, Geodesy and Cartography, the Green Gold Project has been promoting rangeland-use agreements as a legal means with which to ensure herders' user rights to traditional pastureland.

Further information:

www.greenmongolia.mn/index.php?view=article&type=item&val=36

www.greenmongolia.mn/index.php?view=article&type=item&val=28#

www.facebook.com/mongolgreengold

About the author



I have been associated with SDC's Green Gold Project since 2004. At present, I am working as Coordinator for the Green Gold Project Coordination Unit of the Swiss Cooperation Office in Mongolia. I grew up with my grandparents in a small village in a western province of Mongolia. My grandparents were camel herders, and during the summer holidays I would help them to tend baby animals on the rangelands. My love for animals and nature, coupled with growing up in a nomadic herding community, led me to pursue a career in this field. I graduated from Mongolia's National University of Agriculture specialising in agricultural economics, and later completed an MA degree in development economics and social studies at the University of Manchester in Britain. In 2011, I completed a

PhD at ETH Zurich in Switzerland. My research topic was inclusive governance for the value-chain development of livestock products.

SDC's A&FS Network is a very useful platform for practitioners, enabling them to be in contact with one other and learn from each other's experiences, and to openly express their concerns. We initiated the Green Gold Project's Facebook group to encourage herders and local leaders to use the internet and be in contact and to exchange their experiences and knowledge. At present, about 60 percent of the heads of Soum Associations of Pasture-User Groups have an email account and have joined the Facebook group. We recently used our group platform to conduct e-training for the Associations of Pasture-User Group leaders: www.facebook.com/mongolgreengold