Tsaachin Reindeer Herders: Perceptions vs Reality

Sharla Dart
*SIT Study Abroad*

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Tsaachin Reindeer Herders: Perceptions vs Reality

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Mongolia: Nomadism, Geopolitics, and the Environment
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Abstract

Mongolia is a country commonly known for its vast steppes and rich culture of nomadic pastoralism. Images of livestock grazing on the open steppe often come to mind when people think about the country. However, what about the lesser-known reindeer herders? The Tsaachin reindeer herders of Mongolia are an ethnic group in the northernmost region of the country that have been subject to common misconceptions stemming from perceptions created by people consuming exaggerated and false narratives. This study aims to discover if perceptions that outsiders have influence the reindeer herders of the West Taiga.

Keywords: Tsaachin, Perceptions, Social Sciences, Natural Resources and Conservation
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Key Terminology

Aimag: administrative unit in Mongolia, the equivalent of a province

Soum: administrative unit within an aimag

Mongolian livestock: includes cows, horses, sheep, goats, and camels

Orop: Mongolian word describing the act of herders following their animals

Aaruul: a dairy product, dried curd

MNT: Mongolian tugrik, Mongolia’s currency
**Introduction**

When one thinks of Mongolia, images of vast steppes and livestock might come to mind, but what about reindeer? Mongolia is home to one of the few reindeer herding communities in the world. Settled in the northernmost aimag, Khuvsgul, the Dukhan Tuvans are the ethnic group in Mongolia that herds reindeer. This location and locations on the other side of the border have been home to interrelated groups of reindeer herders for centuries (Wheeler, 2000). The Dukhan Tuvans are originally from Tuva in southern Siberia, however, got caught up in border closings after independence movements (Wheeler, 2000). Before the People’s Republic of Tannu-Tuva and the Mongolian People’s Republic recognized each other’s independence, reindeer herders were free to move between the two (Wheeler, 2000). Once their independence was recognized, the borders between the two nations closed and some Dukhan Tuvans remained in Mongolia (Wheeler, 2000). This created problems because they were “ethnically Tuvan but geographically Mongolian” (Wheeler, 2000).

There were multiple periods when the government was trying to get rid of the Dukhan Tuvans, as they were not recognized as Mongolians, however it wasn’t until 1955 that they finally were accepted as such (Wheeler, 2000). Despite achieving official recognition, they were still not seen as equals and had no major significance to the nation’s economy, thus endured a difficult time (Wheeler, 2000). Herd sizes dwindled and many reindeer herders stopped herding reindeer. Government demands, such as forced reindeer slaughterings, and the nation’s lack of commitment to the reindeer herder’s lives, sparked a “deep-seated
mistrust for the Mongolian government that has remained to the present” (Wheeler, 2000).

After the transition to a democratic state, Mongolia privatized reindeer in 1995 (Wheeler, 2000). Dukhan Tuvans continued to experience many hardships after privatization, as herd numbers decreased, and they were forced to harvest reindeer for products to earn some form of profit (Wheeler, 2000). The government did, however, attempt to help by importing reindeer from Russia and delivering relief aid and veterinary care (Wheeler, 2000).

The Dukhan Tuvans have experienced social, cultural, and lifestyle changes for centuries that continue today through development movements in the taiga. Early writers of the Dukhan Tuvans, and the other reindeer ethnic groups in the region believed that they would all soon disappear (Wheeler, 2000). Yet, they are “by no means in danger of extinction as distinct ethnic groups” (Wheeler, 2000). Despite changes and forced ideologies and uniformity, these peoples “have preserved their place in the taiga” (Wheeler, 2000).

More recently, visiting the reindeer herders in Mongolia has become a popular tourist attraction for foreign and domestic tourists. There are multiple tourist companies based in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar where people can sign up for all-inclusive tours. The tours are targeted towards adventurers and thrill-seekers, as the journey to the taiga is no easy feat. This, however, does create problems about the perceptions of the reindeer community.

After a quick Google search of anything close to “visit Mongolia reindeer herders”, the browser is filled with thousands of results from tour companies and
travel blogs telling tourists how and why they should venture to the taiga and experience this unique way of life. A person just perusing through the links could easily be persuaded by the romanticization of this ethnic tourism destination. After clicking on a few of the websites, buzzwords and exaggerated phrases are used to pique the interest of the viewer, as the overall goal is to get them to book a tour.

Crooked Compass, an Australian tour company, provides tours to the Tsaachin community enticing tourists through their own perception of life in the taiga. In their information section on the reindeer herders, phrases such as “on the brink of losing their cultural traditions and nomadic traditions”, “the extreme remoteness of this community has allowed them to remain relatively untouched by western culture”, and “facing extinction” are found (Crookedadmin, 2021). The website also states that “tourism has become significant for these communities” and that “your visit to the reindeer herding people plays an important role to help them and their culture survive” (Crookedadmin, 2021). TravelBuddies, a company based in Ulaanbaatar, promotes similar narratives, such being “this endangered ethnic group” that “live far away from civilization and the progress of the modern world”, and that “tourism is making Dukha people’s life a lot easier” (Country & Culture, 2021).

Exaggerated concepts promoted by tourist companies and other media can create misconceptions about certain ethnic groups. Ethnic tourism can easily be involved with issues of authenticity and consideration for distinct cultures. This is because “cultural hegemony is perpetuated in tourism representation” and
“stereotypical conceptions of minority people are both reinforced and challenged by representation in ethnic tourism” (Yang, 2011). In many cases, non-ethnic people are the ones left to interpret the displayed culture, despite not always having a full understanding (Yang, 2011). There is a large under-representation of ethnic minorities in tourism management, so there is a lack of control over what is exhibited and interpreted from the people being displayed. Expectations of tourists can be heavily influenced by the perceptions obtained by mass media outlets (Yang & Wall, 2009). Misinterpretation of authenticity can often be due to tourists’ “limited knowledge and previous experiences” (Yang & Wall, 2009). These expectations can have an influence on the satisfaction felt by the tourist, despite whether activities are considered authentic or not. There are even some tourists who do not seek authenticity, rather the expectations that they have (Yang & Wall, 2009). This is problematic as “maintaining authenticity and cultural integrity is essential for sustainable ethnic tourism development” (Yang & Wall, 2009).

Tourism can create changes in the way people are perceived and how they perceive others (Yang, 2011). This has potential to lead to issues, as being reinvented through “the tourist gaze” can bring adoptions to new lifestyles and ways of thinking that are more aligned to this gaze rather than the actual culture (Yang, 2011). The Tsaachin reindeer herders in Mongolia have had influences of tourism since the democratic transition. Visitors from around the world come to see the “last reindeer herders of Mongolia”. There is cause to believe that some of the reindeer herders have changed their traditional practices to fit the narrative
created about them. It is hypothesized that the perceptions people have about this ethnic group has some influence on them. The goals of this study are to determine if the common perceptions placed on the Tsaachin reindeer herders are true and what the reality of their livelihood actually looks like.

This study endured a change in focus, as the original proposed topic proved to be of little significance to the reindeer herders after the data collection process began. The original proposal was to see if there is a significant impact from two global crises, climate change and COVID-19, on the community. The idea was supported by the researcher’s curiosity and works stating that reindeer herders were concerned about the environmental changes taking place, as they are so closely tied and dependent on the environment for their livelihood (Johnsen et. al., 2012). However, as data began to be collected during the fieldwork, it was quickly realized that these topics were of little significance to the community. More general information was gathered to gain more data. During the data analysis period of the study, the impact of perceptions about the reindeer herders in Mongolia was decided to be the overarching theme of the paper.

**Methods**

**Location**

This study was conducted in Khuvsgul aimag, the northernmost aimag in Mongolia, where the reindeer herders live. Interviews were conducted in the West Taiga region, as it was the location that could be reached in the given time frame, with the available resources, and the existing local contacts. The team traveled
two hours by car from Ulaan-Uul soum to a host family’s winter camp, where they got on horses and traveled another eight hours to reach the base camp in the West Taiga. Interviews took place in the winter camps (both gers and wood cabins) of members of the reindeer herding community. Multiple reindeer herding families’ winter camps were within walking or riding distance from the base camp. On the way back to Ulaanbaatar, the research team stopped in Ulaan-Uul soum center to interview staff members of the Administration Office of Ulaan Taiga State Special Protected Area.

The interviews took place over a five-day period, from November 13th until the 17th. Two interviews were conducted on the 13th, four on the 14th, two on the 15th, and one on the 17th. No interviews took place on November 16 as the team was traveling back from the taiga to the soum center.

Participants

Thirteen participants were interviewed in total. A few of the interviews took place with more than one, but never more than three respondents. This was because they were family members together in their camp while the team was conducting interviews. The interview that took place in the Administration Office was similar, as the office was one large room with multiple staff, but three people provided answers. Participants from the reindeer herding community were contacted with the help of host families. The host family’s list of contacts in the area was reached by phone. Two families were also interviewed, as they were staying in the other guest ger at the base camp, on their way back to their own camps. The final interview took place in the Administration Office of Ulaan Taiga
State Special Protected Area in Ulaan-Uul soum center. One ranger and two other staff members participated in the interview, giving their own input to the questions. Interview lengths varied from as short as 25 minutes to as long as 4 hours. The length of the interview depended on the time granted by the interviewee and the quality of responses. RH5 and RH6 were the shortest interviews, as they were just passing through the base camp on their way back to their winter camp. All participants, except those from the Administration Office, were gifted a bag of candy after the interview was finished. They were not expecting it as payment, it was rather a token of appreciation for their participation. A bag of candy was chosen as it is a culturally appropriate gift.

**Measures and Procedures**

The research team for this project consisted of one student from the SIT Mongolia program, a translator, and an anthropology researcher from the International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations. The anthropology researcher’s purpose was to collect her own data, as well as assist in the interview process. Data was collected through interviews with each participant. Each interview was audio recorded and translated on the spot. Thorough handwritten notes were taken during each interview after the translation of each answer was given. Similar interview questions were asked during each interview, but some were adapted based on the answers of the interviewees. Many similar questions were asked but no two interviews had the same questions. The interview involving staff at the Administration Office asked different questions, based on their relationship and role within the reindeer herding community. Each interview
was recorded with the informed consent of the interviewee. Before each interview began, participants were informed of the details of the study and asked to read and sign consent forms. Observations were also made during the stay in the reindeer herding community for further context. Additionally, common perceptions of the Tsaachin reindeer herders were found through Google searches and collected from one international and one domestic tourist company. Additional literature was sourced through Google Scholar and from the advisor of the paper. The secondary sources were used for displaying common perceptions, aiding in creating discussions, and drawing conclusions.

Data Analysis

During the interview process, each interviewee was given a code, e.g., RH1, based on the order in which the interviews were conducted. After the fieldwork and traveling were concluded, the handwritten notes were sorted and typed into a single document. Any uncertainties in the data were clarified through follow-up conversations with the translator. Similar answers given were categorized and placed into emerging topics. The four topics that were created became the subcategories for the Results section of the paper. As much of the relevant information collected that could be gathered in a cohesive manner was added. Common answers were summarized together, however, any important notes or differing beliefs were also included.

Ethics

Before the start of each interview and any data collection, each participant was informed by the translator of the purpose of the study, the processes for
collecting data, and other important details. Each person was given a physical copy of a consent form in Mongolian to read over and sign if they felt comfortable. Signed copies from each interviewee in the West Taiga were received and each interviewee received a signed copy from the researcher. Participants were free to ask any questions before signing and also assured that they could stop at any point and that any information given would be safeguarded. Each interview was audio recorded after the participant gave verbal consent to do so. The only signed copy of a consent form that was not received was from the Administration Office in Ulaan-Uul soum. Only twenty copies of the consent form were printed out for the interviewees in the taiga, however, the study posed results that would be better supported with the context from the other side of the story. The team interviewed staff from the Administration Office in the soum center after the consent form was emailed, read over, and verbally agreed to. Verbal consent was given before the audio recording, as it was needed in order to start.

The proposal for the study was reviewed and accepted by the Local Review Board before any fieldwork was conducted. There were no major ethical concerns associated with this project as participants were all over the age of eighteen, agreed to participate of their own free will, and shared only the information that they felt comfortable with. No names nor any identifying information were used in the study to maintain anonymity of the interviewees.
Results

The results gathered from the fieldwork provided other more relevant topics from those originally proposed. As a result, the Results section of the paper will be formatted into recurring topics that arose during each interview and placed under larger themes. The topics will include the input from each interviewee that contributed to its discussion starting from more general information and discoveries about the reindeer community, leading into the changes and challenges, and finally their ideas about the future of the community. The last section provides the other side of the story from the Administration Office. The Results section provides the reality of reindeer herders as they told it, with the final section providing the reality faced by the staff from the government office.

General Information

The Mongolian word, Цаатан, Tsaatan, meaning “those who have reindeer” is the name commonly used in reference to the reindeer community in Mongolia. However, it was quickly learned that that name is not the preferred name. Цаачин, Tsaachin is the preferred name and Tsaatan is even felt as an insult to some. RH1 expressed her aversion to the word, as she was called “Tsaatan” and bullied as a child for being a reindeer herder. She is shocked that the word is so commonly used, especially in international contexts.

The reindeer herding community in Mongolia is located in Khuvsgul aimag in the northernmost part of Mongolia. The reindeer community is separated into two, the West and East Taiga, because of a river. As stated by multiple
interviewees (RH1, RH4, and RH6 who was born in the East but now lives in the West Taiga) there are no major differences between the two locations. The communities are very similar despite the separation. The study took place in the West Taiga, where the number of reindeer is higher, approximately 2,000 (RH3). Each interviewee was asked about the approximate size of their herd with the lowest being 10, the highest about 100, and the most common being about 60 reindeer. Many of the families also raise Mongolian livestock, with horses and cows being the most common. They are raised quite differently, as they eat different things and require different habitats (RH3, RH9). However, they do it to diversify their income, as they earn very little from reindeer products alone (RH7).

The daily life of a reindeer herder changes slightly throughout the seasons. Since the study was conducted during the winter, answers about the winter season’s activities were predominantly given. The winter is difficult because of the cold weather and the common annoyance of the ropes they use to tie the reindeer freezing to the ground. The reindeer are tied to trees during the night and let off in the morning. The ropes are tied near the base of the tree and around the neck, ears, and antlers with enough slack for the reindeer to be able to lay down and hold their head up while standing. RH10 gave a concise summary of a typical day, stating that in the morning he releases them from the ties, herds them to their food which takes about 3-4 hours, he comes back to have lunch, goes and herds them for another 2-3 hours then brings them back close to the ger when it gets dark to tie them up again. Differently to herders of Mongolian livestock who
typically use horses, cars, and/or motorcycles, reindeer herders use reindeer to herd. The castrated males are used for riding and are ridden with saddles and a rope tied around their neck and antlers for steering. Using the same Mongolian word to get horses to move, “chou”, and adding pressure from the rider's legs are the basics for getting the reindeer to move. Additionally, RH2 mentioned taking care of his grandchildren; RH3 said preparing firewood, collecting dung (another fuel source), and taking care of his horses; RH4 and RH7 mentioned making different dairy products such as aaruul from the reindeer milk, and RH6 collects water from the river. The days when they are not up in the mountains are spent completing various daily chores.

Multiple of the interviewees also mentioned herding up in the mountains. One showed the research team pictures of him and his sons on the top of the mountain with their tipi past the tree line and fully exposed to the elements. Yet, each picture was full of happy smiling people. RH6 mentioned how he has just gotten back from being in the mountains for the past four to five months. He described the same type of tasks that must be completed, including herding the reindeer and collecting wood and dung. The families in the mountains herd in pairs and often combine their herds of reindeer (RH8, RH9, RH10). It is more common for the men to be the ones who go to the mountains for a couple of months, while the women stay down in the winter camps. Each family does things slightly differently, however the tasks that need to be completed both at their winter camps and up in the mountains are similar.
In the summer, all of the families in the West Taiga move to Мэнгэ
Булга, Menge Bulga, the summer camp location. RH3 mentioned how it is the
place where they bring their herd to graze during the summer and that about 2,000
reindeer can be seen there as well as cows and horses. The spring season is the
busiest as it is the birthing season. Each female has one calf per year and the
survival rates depend on how well the herder takes care of them (RH1). If they are
well taken care of from all of the dangers threatening them, then they are able to
make it through the season without losing any. However, it is much easier said
than done. The newborns take about two to three hours to stand up and the first 7
days after they are born are when they are most vulnerable (RH9). They grow and
become strong very fast, but they are naive and not very smart (RH9). They
require a lot of attention, as the land is risky. The newborns can easily fall into
holes, drown in rivers, become frostbit, and are easy targets for many predators
(RH9). The spring keeps the reindeer herders very busy as they have to keep a
close eye on the newborns. The life of a reindeer herder year-round is very busy,
and they never have weekends (RH7). Everyone works hard, even the women.
RH1 said that when she goes outside, she works like a man, but still has her duties
inside the ger to complete too.

Families in the reindeer community typically have between 3 to 5
members. The community is fairly young, as only a couple of people are over the
age of 60, according to RH2, and the oldest member is 88, the mother of RH1.
The children help with the chores when they are home from school. There are
soum centers where reindeer herder's kids are sent to attend school. Ulaan-Uul
and Tsagaannuur were the ones most commonly mentioned. When their kids are
picked up for the weekend, which is not always frequent, they are picked up on
Friday nights and dropped off on Sundays. During the week, children often stay in
dormitories in the soum center.

It has been almost 100 years since the first reindeer herders arrived in
Mongolia from Russia (RH1). Since then, significant changes to the country of
Mongolia, such as the transition to democracy, have occurred. Curiosity arose to
discover what the most significant changes were according to the interviewees.
The answers most commonly included advances in technology and education.
RH1 described life as totally different from before, as they are “walking with
modern changes now”. She described life when she was younger and how they
used to use an ax to prepare wood, used wooden kitchen utensils, and didn't have
a stove. Now they use electric chainsaws, kitchen utensils made of metal and
steel, and a stove can be found in every winter camp. RH5 mentioned the
advancements in mobile network coverage. There was rarely any service coverage
when she was younger, but now everyone has at least a home phone and generally
one smartphone. The coverage still is not the best, but it has significantly
improved and helped improve the communication capabilities between the
families. The use of social media has also increased, as many members of the
community use Facebook (RH8). Televisions are also a common feature in
homes, providing entertainment and news sources. Education was the other most
common answer, as the children are sent to the soum centers each week and study
for longer than the older generation did. Their religious practices of Shamanism
however remained, as a majority still practice the religion with strong connections to nature and communication with passed souls.

Tourism

Tourists don’t often visit the families interviewed, but when they do they come through tour agencies based in Ulaanbaatar (RH1, RH2, RD7, RH8, RH9). Foreigners usually hail from France, the United States, and Israel (RH7, RH8). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism has significantly decreased as only a few domestic tourists visited during the height of the pandemic (RH1, RH2, RD7, RH8, RH9). An increase in domestic tourists has been observed after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (RH8). When tourists visit, they ask questions, take photos, buy souvenirs, and watch how the reindeer are milked (RH1, RH8). The highlight, however, is the reindeer, as that is what most of the tourists are most interested in (RH1, RH3). Most of the interviewees expressed a positive attitude towards tourists visiting them. RH1 and RH9 explained how it is good when they come because they can earn some extra money, while RH8 said that she really enjoys it when they come because she thinks it’s fun and likes meeting people from around the world. RH9 likes when tourists come because he can make new friends and added that he is still in contact with some of the previous visitors. RH10 said that it adds some variability to their days when the tourist comes. He enjoys the change as he explained that there is nothing to do here. RH1 also mentioned how some families are really into it, but others find it annoying.

As for the impact of tourism, RH8 said that the impact on their income really is not significant. It is only a little increase, as they do not make a lot of
money from the souvenirs. There are certain families who have stronger ties to tour companies, so they are the ones most visited when tourists come. Their sales are not as good because they cannot compete with the families that are working with the tour companies (RH1). RH3 said that he does not know much about tourism but did say that the tours are now well organized. However, both RH1 and RH7 expressed some slight concerns. They both said that the tour agencies, guides, and translators are all from the capital. RH1 believes that it would be more beneficial for the companies to work with more families and not just the ones they know well. RH2 added to her comment by saying that he would welcome them if they came and would be happy to participate if they were invited to be involved. RH7 said that she does not know what the tour guides are saying so she doesn't know if it's accurate, while RH1 and RH2 both agreed that the guides explain the reindeer herder’s lives from their perspective. RD7 also mentioned that the tourist attractions that happen by Lake Khuvsgul are fake but assured that it will not happen in the West Taiga.

**Challenges**

The life of reindeer herders is difficult in itself, as reindeer are hard to herd (RH7). They are half-wild animals that split up from each other in rough terrain (RH7). Having 60 animals that go in all different directions often leaves herders spending the cold nights out looking for them (RH2). There is very little rest, as herders are always moving and taking care of the animals in difficult weather (RH9). Although the cold temperatures and snow make things more difficult, the real challenge is protecting their herd from predators (RH9). Wolves
are a common predator of the reindeer, but the difficulty comes from the restrictive laws prohibiting anyone from being able to carry a rifle in the protected areas, in which the community is surrounded by. Answers to how they protect their herd from predators were not fully answered, only mentions of dogs being brought with them (RH6).

The State Protected Areas around the territory of the reindeer community were established in 2012 (SPA). Multiple interviewees mentioned the challenges that arise from living so close to protected areas. Limiting their pastureland was the biggest challenge that was mentioned. RH3 described how the plants eaten by reindeer are becoming harder to find but that there are more in the taiga, the protected areas. Herders have been able to stay in the protected areas for a month or two before being asked to move back by the rangers (RH6). It is pretty common for people to stay in the taiga, especially when they follow their animals during “отор, otor” (RH6). Reindeer are very picky animals, only eating specific lichens and mushrooms and constantly moving to find the freshest ones (RH3). Another reason for moving farther into the protected areas is the greater snow coverage (RH2). RH10 described the risks of natural disasters because of the limited land. He said that they are more at risk of being caught in natural disasters, especially avalanches, because the safer spots are in the protected areas. If they were free to go where they wanted, they wouldn't have to use the riskier spots for grazing (RH10).

RH1, RH3, and RH10 all mentioned the dangers of avalanches and how they are a relatively common occurrence, especially when they bring the herds up
into the mountains. It is an incredibly dangerous event as it can easily happen while they are herding (RH1). RH10 told a story from 2 years ago when he was herding with his oldest son (who was in his early teenage years) and how his son got caught in an avalanche. Together they were moving a combined herd of about 200 reindeer up in the mountains. His son was leading about 6 reindeer behind him when an avalanche covered him and the reindeer in snow. He was able to grab onto a tree and pull himself out and all of the reindeer also survived. He mentioned how disastrous avalanches are, as they destroy everything in their path. Avalanches are more likely to happen when large herds are being moved but combining multiple families’ herds in the mountains is how they move the reindeer (RH10).

When asked about any changes they have noticed to the environment and climate the most common answers were less snow and warming temperatures. RH3, RH6, and RH8 all also mentioned decreases in water levels. RH3 has been in the mountains for 64 years and provided his observations over the years, stating that the water levels have decreased. He gave the example of there being floods every June when he was young. His explanation was not because of humans or animals, but that it is just nature changing on its own. He thinks it is from global warming, but also admitted that he does not understand climate change well. He added that herders cannot do much about the environmental and global warming problems because they do not know much about it. RH8 also mentioned that she has heard about climate change from the news but doesn't know what will happen and is curious about what she can do to stop it. RH1 was the only respondent to
provide her solutions to slowing climate change: by reducing the number of animals and cars, as cars break up the soils.

Discussions about common diseases in reindeer and herders were also had. Hypertension was the only condition said to be a common occurrence among herders. RH1 and RH2 said that certain herbs are used to treat it, along with smoking cigarettes. RH3 described how strong reindeer herders are and how they don’t get sick. There were, however, multiple mentions of the lack of access to healthcare in the taiga. Their camps are far from soum centers so any efforts to have emergency services in the taiga take hours and are limited.

The impact of COVID-19 was found to be of little significance to the health of the community. Both the East and West taigas were designated “Green Zones” as there were no COVID-19 cases (RH2). The interviewees heard about it either on the television or when visiting the soum centers. All except RH2 and RH10 were worried when they first heard about it. The two that weren’t said it was because they don’t get sick and thought of it only as a cough. All except RH6 got at least one shot, but most had gotten three. All interviewees are no longer worried about it, as rationalized by RH3; they are healthy people who rarely gather.

As for reindeer diseases, the most common answer was about swollen pockets that form on their legs. To treat, they generally puncture a hole in the growth to let the blood drain (RH8, RH9). Herbs are given and, in some cases, human medicine and medicine meant for Mongolian livestock are given (RH7, RH9, RH10). They do their best with what they have, however, there were also
mentions of knowledge gaps about why these lumps form. Fevers and lung
diseases were also noted, which are treated with the same herbs and medicines
(RH3, RH6, RH7, RH9, RH10). When reindeer are slaughtered and have the lung
disease, (when the lungs turn white) the entire carcass is discarded, and nothing is
used (RH6). All of the reindeer are vaccinated every spring by veterinarians,
however, what they are being vaccinated for was not known (RH6). RH2 did
mention that they were vaccinated against hand, foot, and mouth disease but could
not list any others. RH10 also mentioned that diseases are commonly spread
during the summertime, as all 2,000 reindeer in the West Taiga are gathered in
one spot. Usually, all of the families have problems with their reindeer getting
sick with about 1 to 5 getting sick in every herd (RH8).

The involvement of the government was another frequently mentioned
challenge, as many believe it is not enough. All members of reindeer herding
families in Mongolia are given compensation each month from the government,
including children. As long as a person lives in the taiga and has reindeer, they are
eligible for the compensation (RH8). Each adult is given 240,000 MNT according
to RH1 and RH10, while two amounts for children were provided by RH1 and
RH8: 120,000 MNT and 100,000 MNT. The compensation has undoubtedly
increased over the years, as it used to be only bread and meat (RH1). The most
recent increase was in the last year or two (RH1). RH1, RH9, and RH10 all
expressed their frustration because the amount is not enough. RH10 even called it
“bullshit” as one pair of boots cost 200,000 MNT. Especially now since the price
of everything has increased, it is not enough (RH9). Additionally, the profits from
reindeer are very little because few people buy their products (RH9). RH8 was the only one to acknowledge that it is limited but it does help. Expressions about the lack of healthcare in the taiga were added from RH1 and RH10. RH7 added how members of the community have sent official letters to the aimag center over the issues with limited pasture. Despite the numerous attempts to provoke change, there have been no further movements (RH7). This concerns RH7 because if the government doesn't help them now then they will be putting a lot of pressure on the children who are to continue their heritage.

**Future**

When asked about the future of reindeer herding in Mongolia, there were similar hopes and worries. RH1 began by saying she is worried about the future. She is worried her children will not continue herding reindeer. RH2, RH5, and RH7 all agreed, as RH2 fears that more people will move to the soum centers and RH7 believes that only one or two of her three children will continue to herd. RH1 and RH5 hope that there will be more reindeer and reindeer herders, but RH5 also expressed her concerns about predators inhibiting them from doing so. Concerns about losing their traditions were expressed by RH1, RH2, RH7, and RH8. RH1 and RH8 hope that more people will learn the Dukha language. RH3 believes that it will survive as it is being revived, however, RH7 is worried and believes that there is a high probability that it will disappear, despite it being taught in schools. RH2 wants the community to develop technologically and have more infrastructure, but RH9 is worried about reindeer herders being left behind in development. RH7 hopes for more government involvement, while RH9 is
concerned about the limited pasture. RH9 doesn't know what the younger generations are going to do because even if they want to herd, they are limited by the State Protected Areas.

RH10 is the only respondent to give a very pessimistic answer about the future of reindeer herders in Mongolia. He believes that there is no future for the younger generation and that if things stay like they are now, in 10 years there won't be any more reindeer herders. He believes that people will just move to the soum centers because of how risky the lifestyle is. Their whole life is full of risks and dangers such as hunger and avalanches. There is no guarantee that they will make it to the next day, so he believes that there will soon cease to have a reindeer community in Mongolia. Additionally, RH10 mentioned an important limitation on the future of reindeer herding. The nature of raising reindeer is through inbreeding (RH10). The population of reindeer in Mongolia came from a very small herd after moving from Russia (RH10). They all have the same ancestors, so the entire population is a result of generations of inbreeding (RH10). The community does keep track of which reindeer are being bred together, as the families bred their herds together, but there is still no breeding diversity (RH10). He also added that they even imported about 10 reindeer from Russia, but nothing changed (RH10). The situation in Russia is perhaps even worse because they don’t keep track of the breeding as the reindeer roam more freely (RH10).

Despite RH10’s beliefs, more interviewees had hope for the future. RH3 and RH7 agreed that as long as there are reindeer, reindeer herders will exist. RH9 added that there is no culture without the reindeer. RH1 expressed how proud she
is to be a reindeer herder and RH8 added that she loves this lifestyle, always moving around and learning new things. Raising reindeer is an accomplishment itself, which is recognized by different levels of government as it is full of dangers and risks. There are soum, aimag, and state champion awards for people who are raising reindeer well (RH3). RH7 has won the soum champion twice for her 26 years of work raising the number of her herd. It took her 26 years to raise her herd size to 100 reindeer from 26 (RH7). RH3 revealed that he and his family have won the soum award five times, the aimag award twice, and the state championship once 3 to 4 years ago. A small amount of money is granted to the winners of the soum and aimag awards, but the state championship grants 5,000,000 MNT to the winner (RH3). RH3 described how he won the state championship after supporting about five families. Life was tough for everyone after the 1990s, as the country was transitioning to democracy. He mentored families, giving them advice for raising reindeer. The herders were very proud of their accomplishments, as raising reindeer is a very risky undertaking, but it is also a heritage and an occupation (RH7). The culture is of course changing, but it is not dying (RH7).

**The Administration Office**

As the research team began their travels back to Ulaanbaatar, they stopped in Ulaan-Uul soum center to speak with staff from the Administration Office of Ulaan Taiga State Special Protected Area. The primary reason for this interview was to hear the other side of the story about the relationship between the reindeer community and the State Protected Area.
The State Protected Areas monitored by the office were established in 2012 to protect all of the land declared for conservation (SPA). This includes the pastureland, as reindeer herders are allowed to herd in some locations (SPA). The office is in charge of 1.5 million square meters of land, which is totaled from the Ulaan Taiga Strictly Protected Area, Tengis-Shishged National Park, and Horidol Saridag Strictly Protected Area (SPA). They protect the lands from all threats such as wildfires, illegal hunting, and illegal mining (SPA). The areas are home to many different types of wildlife, including ones on the endangered species list (SPA). Examples of musk deer, red deer, sable, boars, and snow leopards were given (SPA). The Protected Areas are only to be used for research and traveling with a gun or dogs is prohibited (SPA). This is where the issues with the reindeer herding community started to emerge.

The conversation about the reindeer herders provided a different reality from what the herders provided. The staff of the Administration Office revealed that how things actually are is not what the reindeer herders say it is (SPA). They began by first giving the actual number of reindeer in both taigas, being only a maximum of 2,000 with 1,500 in the West and about 500 in the East (SPA). They mentioned how the reindeer herders always increase the numbers (SPA). For instance, RH10 mentioned there being 2,000 reindeer in the West Taiga alone. They also revealed the issue is not about limited pastureland, in fact they have enough (SPA). They are able to herd in certain areas of the Protected Areas, however, the greatest issue is with illegal hunting (SPA). Mongolia has national restrictions on hunting and requires permits for many instances (SPA). The
problem with reindeer herders is that they are hunting in Protected Areas and killing endangered species (SPA). The office has video and material evidence of the reindeer herders committing such acts. One of the rangers described a video they have of a group of herders carrying a gun and bringing their dogs with them on a hunt. He then said that the next camera picked up the same group of herders but this time with more guns. He explained that he thinks they hide them in the woods and go to get them once they go out for a hunt. He also mentioned how they have found empty ammunition boxes and seen multiple trees with bullet holes in them (SPA). While the interview was being conducted, another staff member was labeling and taking pictures of evidence they had found next to multiple of the reindeer herder’s tipis. He explained that they were different bones and furs of some of the endangered species in the area.

Figure 1: Bones and furs of endangered species found next to reindeer herder’s tipis in the Ulaan Taiga Strictly Protected Area.

Convincing the reindeer herders to stop hunting in the Protected Areas is one of the biggest undertakings of the Administration Office. They work with
everyone in the community, visiting them to go over the laws and trying to make them understand why they should stop hunting (SPA). They also mentioned how life is getting better for the reindeer herders, as the transition to democracy was hard on everyone. The reindeer herders used to go up into the mountains to hunt and earn extra money from it (SPA). Now their lives are improving so hunting isn’t as much of a necessity. One of the staff also mentioned how hunting is becoming a less frequent activity in the community as people are becoming lazy (SPA). He mentioned that men above 30 years old want to hunt but are too lazy, however people below 30 are who they see hunting the most (SPA). He stated that the people below 30 in the reindeer community still hunt because they believe it is part of their heritage (SPA).

One of the rangers expressed his frustrations about the whole situation. He said that if someone shadowed him for a month or two, they wouldn’t want to come back. They would see things for how they really are and see firsthand the cruelties of man. His aggravation surfaced when he was describing how the reindeer herders are always trying to fight the department and that “all of the lying and bullshit is in their blood”. He added that the reindeer herders live in the wild so they think they don’t have to follow the laws. Rangers and herders have all grown up together in the schools, so rangers have insight into the reality of the situation. He continued by stating that everyone, all ethnic groups included, needs to follow the laws.

There is, however, hope in the office that things will change. They said that the number of wild animals is increasing, more people are being informed
and educated about the laws, and people are starting to change their ways (SPA). The laws work for the herders as they receive enough compensation, but at the same time, they need to take responsibility and follow the laws (SPA).

**Discussion**

The study originally aimed to discover the impact of two global crises, climate change and COVID-19, on the reindeer herding community in Mongolia and their thoughts about the future. However, the fieldwork quickly revealed that these topics are rather insignificant and so the greater challenges were further uncovered. The initial interview questions were adapted, and each interview revealed the reality of the lives of herders in the taiga. The Results section states the answers as they were given, however, after gaining the other side of the story from the Administration Office, questions of authenticity arose.

The perceptions created by tourist companies and mass media were quickly disproven once having arrived at a reindeer herding family’s winter camp. The idea that they are an “endangered” group of peoples far from modern developments were quickly replaced by actualities. This is not to discredit the challenges faced by the reindeer herders but rather to reinforce the notion that the tourist companies do exaggerate their descriptions of the community in an effort to make them more attractive to tourists. The strong network of the community was observed through the use of mobile phone networks and televisions. The community was also revealed to be not so different from Mongolian livestock herders. Many of the reindeer herders also raise Mongolian livestock, also
disproving the common misconception that they are solely dependent on their reindeer. They practice many similar traditions, including ger etiquette, and eating the same traditional foods, just sometimes using reindeer meat and milk.

Climate change and the reindeer herder’s relationship with environmental changes also was of little significance to the interviewees. Some mentioned that they knew very little about it, one stating that herders can’t do much about the environmental and global warming problems because they do not know much about it (RH3). Mentions of less snow were common and some brought up that certain plants eaten by the reindeer are becoming harder to find. However, the issue was more about not being able to move freely because of the State Protected Area, rather than the climatic changes themselves.

Tourism was demonstrated to be of little significance to the survival of the community. Many herders mentioned that it helps a little bit, but since they are not heavily involved, the decrease that was seen because of the COVID-19 pandemic had little influence on them. It is seen as an extra way of earning money, a way to meet new people, and have a change from their daily tasks, but not a reliable source of income.

There were a few topics discussed by both the reindeer herders and the staff in the Administration Office that provided different answers from one another. The reindeer herders said that the number of reindeer in the West Taiga was around 2,000, while the Administration Office said that there is a maximum of 1,500 in the West and a total of about 2,000. The reindeer herders also mentioned the difficulty of limited pasture because of the State Protected Areas.
Many mentioned how they need to move further into the areas, but they can’t because the rangers prevent them. However, the Administration Office stated that they do have enough pasture, they just use it as an excuse to hunt.

Hunting was a topic that some interviewees were wary to speak on when asked. RH2 revealed that hunting is done on very specific days, as it is believed that certain days can bring bad luck. For instance, days of significant life events like the death of a family member are bad days for hunting (RH2). The good and bad days are different and determined by each family (RH2). RH2 and RH3 both mentioned that they used to hunt a lot when they were younger but now that they are older, they do not. RH6 was reluctant to answer questions about it, as he gave little information and stopped answering different interview questions after the topic of hunting was brought up. After speaking with the staff at the Administration Office it was understood that illegal hunting occurs often by the reindeer herders. The reindeer herders were reluctant to speak on the topic of hunting because it is an illegal act that they didn't want to incriminate themselves to by speaking on it. Instead, their feelings towards the establishment of the State Protected Areas were highlighted.

The information gathered brings up issues of local community involvement in projects and decisions that directly affect them, such as government decisions and environmental conservation. Mongolia set the goal of establishing 30% of its landmass under protection by 2030. As of 2020, “108 million hectares of land (pastureland), or 69% of Mongolia’s territory (156.4 million ha.) is used by mobile pastoralists” with 31.4 million hectares of Protected
Areas overlapping with pastoral land (Dulam and Ichinkhorloo, 2021). In just Tsagaannuur soum, where some of the reindeer herding population lives, 75.8% is under protection by the “Tengis Shishged” national conservation park (Dulam and Ichinkhorloo, 2021). The available pastureland is only 2.4%, however, the “reindeer herders living in Tsagaannuur are allowed to use this conservation park” (Dulam and Ichinkhorloo, 2021). There are general policy documents that support pastoralists, however, there are no detailed studies about the actual impact on mobile pastoralists prevented from using protected areas (Dulam and Ichinkhorloo, 2021).

Additionally, there are opportunities for local people to participate in “local self-governance and political decision-making”, however, there is also a lack of thorough assessments of whether they use the legal opportunities available and the reasons behind it (Dulam and Ichinkhorloo, 2021). Regarding the reindeer herders, a decree was passed in 2013 to “support their living conditions and their economy” by providing “a minimum wage for adults, with half of this minimum wage sum paid to children” (Dulam and Ichinkhorloo, 2021). Policies, like the one for supporting reindeer herders, have improved pastoralists’ livelihoods, however “the rate of poverty among herders is still the highest in the country” (Dulam and Ichinkhorloo, 2021). There is limited legal rights for mobile pastoralists to participate in decisions made on land for conservation, which often reduces the size of their pasture (Dulam and Ichinkhorloo, 2021). RH7 mentioned this as well when she was expressing her frustrations about trying to make changes about pastureland with the government. The involvement of local people,
specifically the Tsaachin reindeer herders, in legal decisions is very limited despite the decisions having direct influences on their livelihoods.

Based on the results gathered, a complete conclusive answer is difficult to support. The differences in the perceptions of this minority have led to misunderstandings about them. Many groups of people including tourists and even the rangers themselves have different understandings of the reindeer herders. The actual impact of perceptions on the reindeer herding community is inconclusive, however, it is likely that the perceptions of different groups of people have some influence. For instance, it is possible that the impact of these perceptions could influence the ways in which some of the reindeer herders wish to be perceived. This can be supported by the differing answers on topics discussed by the two groups interviewed and the disproval of common stereotypes. It could also be the case that herders have changed parts of their traditional practices in other reindeer communities. For instance, RH7 stated that the reindeer herders by Lake Khuvsgul are fake. This study does, however, bring up multiple productive discussions and future research topics about perceptions, authenticity, and local involvement in legal decisions.

It is also important to mention the limitations of this study. The data collected was gathered with the intention of a different focus topic, so there are gaps within the analysis. Another shortcoming is that all of the data was provided through a translator. There is always the possibility of misinterpretation or left-out information when a translator is used. Time was another limiting factor as all of the fieldwork, analysis, and construction of the paper needed to be completed in a
one-month timeframe. With traveling to the taiga being no easy feat, the research team was only able to travel there once and stay for four nights. This inhibited the ability to ask any follow-up questions or clarifications from the interviewees themselves. Additionally, the study would have benefited from more participants, especially those involved in the tourism industry, previous tourists, etc. Furthermore, the student is not a researcher nor has completed a project such as this. A project conducted by a professional would likely have fewer gaps in the conclusions and more specific data. Nevertheless, this project provided a fruitful learning experience with lifelong memories.

Conclusion

This study provided the realities of the Tsaachin reindeer herders and the staff from the Administration Office in the soum as they see it through interviews conducted. Drawing from tourist companies’ websites and the data collected through fieldwork, results showed that many of the perceptions the media has created about this community were proven to be wrong. Interviewees of the Tsaachin community provided their biggest challenges and ideas about the future, while the Administration Office of Ulaan Taiga State Special Protected Area stated their biggest challenges when interacting with the reindeer herders. Differing results made way for discussions to be had about perceptions and local involvement in legal decisions, despite there being a change in the study’s focus.

Multiple ideas for future research topics can be gathered from this study including those of perceptions, authenticity, local engagement, and more specific
components of the Tsaachin’s livelihood. The impact of tourists’ perceptions of the Tsaachin reindeer herders on their satisfaction levels, tourist's changes in perceptions after visiting the reindeer herders, and the perceptions the reindeer herders have of themselves or how they wish to be perceived are some examples. More broad topics could include finding a balance between environmental conservation and the ability of traditional communities to continue their livelihoods, as well as how to increase local communities’ involvement in legal decisions. Mongolia is a country heavily dependent on traditional pastoralism. It is crucial to preserve this heritage as development further extends throughout the country.

It is important to acknowledge our own perceptions about different ethnic groups, as well as more broad subjects. The biases we have can easily alter the image we have of things in the world around us. It is better to understand why we have these perceptions but to also discover the truths.
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Changing Taiga: Challenges to Mongolian Reindeer Husbandry. Portraits

10.1080/13683500802406880


## Appendix

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