EXCAVATING ONE ANTHROPOLOGIST’S INVESTIGATION INTO CONSERVATION-BASED CONFLICTS IN NORTHERNMOST MONGOLIA—A BRIEF EXPOSITION

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ABSTRACT
This photo essay addresses conservation-based conflicts that stem from the Tengis–Shishged National Park and are imbricated in broader institutional processes, drawing on seven months of ethnography conducted in 2014–2018 among Dukha hunter-gatherer reindeer pastoralists in northernmost Mongolia. I elaborate some of the institutional, social, and economic dimensions of these conflicts and expose a history of my own multifaceted learning process in and beyond the field. Excavating this history serves as a means to convey topical knowledge and affords a deeper appreciation of how learning takes place. Dispositions emerge in mutually generative counterpoint with experience(s), skills, and inclinations through various stages of anthropological practice, namely (though not exclusively) fieldwork. I do this hoping to bring attention not only to the existence of conflicts over the national park and their effects on Dukha people, but also to some of the subtleties that make these conflicts and effects so contentious. In doing so, I highlight the salience of anthropological practice and dispositions and the time and phasal oscillations that go into them for understanding and pragmatically engaging with contemporary social issues, whether they be localized, systemic, or some multi-scalar amalgam of the two. I briefly introduce the term ‘eth(n)ography/ic,’ which develops van Dooren and Rose’s (2016) notion of more-than-merely-human “ethography” by combining ‘ethnos’ and ‘ethos.’ I develop this concept because I wish to emphasize how anthropological attention to ethea often exceeds focus on any one distinct ethnicity and, indeed, species.

KEYWORDS:
Mongolia; conservation-based conflicts; educational excavation.

In 2013–2014, when I serendipitously learned of the Tsaatan’s existence and subsequently prepared for ethnographic fieldwork among them, I engaged publicly available texts that would afford any keen Anglophone reader some additional information, notably: Tsaatans (a Mongolian exogenous ethnonym) identify as “Dukha;” approximately two hundred Dukhas inhabit the taiga in two regions (East and West Taigas); they are Tuvinian refugees (or descendants thereof) who were granted Mongolian citizenship following militarized expulsion campaigns spanning 1927–1956 (further literary and field research would reveal that, dating back at least a few hundred years, the forebears of some Dukhas had dwelled in present day Mongolia); their forebears were likely among the first domesticators of any animal; their herds were collectivized during state-socialism and were subsequently privatized in the 1990s; they rear horses; historically they have been hunter-gatherers in addition to pastoralists (Wheeler 2000); and they now make a living in part through an arguably inequitable tourism industry (Keay 2008).

Conducting MA fieldwork in 2014, I learned the Dukhas have great diversity as to how they identify, either as Dukha, Dukha and Tsaatan, or any amalgam of these with other nearby ethnic groups. They also rear dogs and, in
some cases, cattle, yaks, sheep, and/or goats. They continue hunting and gathering despite their territory becoming a national park in 2011. Nature conservation regulations in the park include a hunting ban that stymies Dukha livelihoods. Nowadays, information about this conservation-based conflict is readily available to keen readers in multiple languages or to others who might otherwise stumble upon this on their social media feeds.

I learned from Dukhas that they cannot legally access approximately two thirds of their territory, and many of their sacred sites—the worship of which is usually most effective in situ— are located in the Russian republic of Tuva or in legally inaccessible areas of their Mongolian territory.

My MA thesis attends to ways Dukhas realize livelihoods through largely collaborative and playful acrobatic improvisation within and across interspecific boundaries. While writing it, I learned that the national park is a recognized International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Category II Protected Area. Only six pages of my MA thesis specifically address issues regarding the park. Through literary research done while writing PhD program and scholarship applications, I learned the park is officially named “Tengis–Shishged National Park” (TSNP) and is a partner of Yosemite National Park in the US National Park Service “Sister Park” program (since 2015, as I learned while researching for this essay). However, conservation-based conflicts framed my thesis by virtue of the fact that they loom around the Dukhas, eth(n)ographic practice, and writing related to them.

My experiences in the field compelled me to take an increasingly action-oriented approach in my research with Dukhas and later encouraged me to pursue a PhD more closely focused on issues regarding TSNP. Research and coursework done in preparation for preliminary PhD dissertation fieldwork helped me re-enter the field in 2018 more cognizant of TSNP’s imbrication in multilateral and transnational networks and processes, and the history preceding its emergence as a distinct subsection of “Ulaan
Taiga Special Protected Area(s)” (UTSPA) when UTSPA gained IUCN status. I also became more familiar with non-analogous yet relatable situations elsewhere, and with different ways of engaging anthropological theory and output.

When I returned to the Dukhas and met active TSNP rangers, I learned that the infamous "total" ban on hunting is more complex than I understood from previous conversations or as conveyed in news articles, NGO statements, and some anthropological writings (as recently as 2019). Although the ban on fishing seems to be formal and total, the one on hunting is partial. According to official documents obtained in the field, fifteen species have special status. Hunting these species in the “Tēngis–Shishgēdīn Baigalyn Tsogtsolbert Gazar” zone is legal only if one purchases permits from UTSPA headquarters—up to 175 km away from Dukha dwellings. Likewise, hunting in the “Khoriatḗ Būs” and “Ontsoi Būs” zones requires
permits purchased directly from the Ministry of Environment and Green Development—up to 1,100 km away. All of these permits exceed locals’ budgets.

Furthermore, most hunting grounds are situated in zones Dukhas cannot legally access without going through a formally cost-free but, practically speaking, taxing and contentious multi-permit system (with three issuing authorities: TSNP, the Mongolian General Authority for Border Protection, and, for the Ontsgöl ᠠᠤ, the Ministry of Environment). This system was established in 2016 following Dukha grievances, but the result for locals is a de facto ban on hunting most (if not all) species and accessing most of Dukha territory.

There is also a formal ban on harvesting (and trading) some traditional medicinal plants (namely snow lotus). Dukhas must purchase yearly permits for harvesting dead firewood and special permits for green lumber used in the construction of winter cabins. Moreover, they obtain mandatory albeit formally cost-free yearly permits from the Khövsgöl Aimag government for inhabiting the taiga.

Five months into fieldwork I began to grasp discrepancies in what people know or say about park regulations. I also began to notice intra-community conflicts around TSNP, notably those deriving from some Dukhas’ participation in regulatory implementation.

Fieldwork affords the establishment and ongoing entertainment of intimate relationships with people in situ, setting the foundations for a way of life that shapes indelible experience(s), aptitudes, and inclinations that constitute dispositions inextricable from an anthropologist’s person and work.
Writing is a craft through which novel research occurs in domains of academic literature, popular literature and media, arts, dreams, conversations, etc. Anthropological dispositions are further shaped by this process and shape the latter in a feedback loop. Writing can be harnessed as a voice among other types of expression to create research ‘outputs’ that have value outside of the end product or ‘deliverable.’ Such outputs surge forth from the researcher much like an electrical current is outputted by a battery as crystallizations of all that one learns.

Grave contemporary issues are manifold and complicated and, despite their urgency, require the largest investments of time, energy, and relationship-building, along with careful research and output, to resolve them effectively and in an axiologically sound fashion.
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX:
Captions
Figure 1. Settlement group caravans circling around a cairn to worship local spirits while shifting from summer to autumn camps, atop Hulagiin Dawa, West Taiga. Photo by author.

Figure 2. Dukha man carving reindeer antler with an axe to make handcrafts for selling to tourists, in Huulag, West Taiga. Photo by author.

Figure 3. Dukha girl uprooting an edible lily bulb, in Dod Sallig, East Taiga. Photo by author.

Figure 9. Dukha woman helping her daughters and sister uproot lily bulb, in Dod Sallig, East Taiga. Photo by author.

Figure 4. Dukha girl showing author an uprooted lily bulb, in Dod Sallig, East Taiga. Photo by author.

Figure 5. Darhad-Dukha man surveying land to situate stray reindeer while a friend distributes cigarettes among the men gathered after herding reindeer into pen, in Men Bulag, West Taiga. Photo by author.

Figure 6. Tengis-Shishged National Park ranger showing author pages from an official book of laws pertaining to the park while on a surveillance trip, in Men Bulag, West Taiga. Photo by author.

Figure 7. Snow lotus, in Dod Sallig, East Taiga. Photo by author.

Figure 8. Dukha elder tying medicinal plants in bunches before hanging them to dry. Photo by author.