

Call for action to protect the last remaining intact steppe ecosystem on earth in Eastern Mongolia

Eastern Mongolian Steppe Statement 2022

Jointly elaborated by participants of the experts workshop

“TOWARDS THE WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION OF THE EASTERN MONGOLIAN STEPPES”

Ulaanbaatar, 7th of July 2022

Situation

We state that most of the world's natural grasslands of the temperate zones have been converted to agricultural land or are degraded by overgrazing and other human impacts. The land-use change from fully adapted traditional mobile pastoralism to agriculture has destroyed most temperate grasslands over the last two centuries, including the rich associated cultures, lifestyles and knowledge systems. It has destroyed the soils by deflation and erosion, it degraded ecosystem functions and reduced biodiversity, and it converted vast areas of a globally significant carbon sink and storage to a carbon source.

Today Mongolia and especially Eastern Mongolia is the only place in the world where enormous areas of relatively intact grasslands continue to support traditional mobile herding as well as maintaining their ecological functions thus contributing to the global climate regulation. The main distinctive characteristic of the Eastern Mongolian steppes compared to other steppe ecosystems is the vast size of undisturbed steppe ecosystems: grasslands across thousands of square kilometers with very specific biodiversity. The herds of an estimated 1.5 to 2 million Mongolian white-tailed gazelles (*Procapra gutturosa*) are an inseparable element of the ecosystem, both inhabiting and shaping it.

However, huge parts of these unique grasslands, its biodiversity, ecological functions and its integrity as well as traditional and formerly sustainable form of livelihood are threatened especially by:

- desertification because of overgrazing as a result of excessive livestock,
- climate change,
- conversion to agricultural land,
- increasing transportation infrastructure (fenced railroads, highways as well as pipelines and power lines), and
- resource extraction.

Recognizing the global values of the Eastern Mongolian steppes, the Government of Mongolia included them in the Tentative list as a potential serial World Heritage site of 5 component parts in 2014. The German Government was requested by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of Mongolia to support the World Heritage nomination process. As a first step, the Michael Succow Foundation together with the Mongolian Bird Conservation Center implemented a feasibility study that analyzed perspectives of the World Heritage nomination of the Eastern Mongolian Steppes. The study concluded that the natural values of the proposed property are appropriate to meet the standards of Outstanding Universal Value according to the natural criteria (ix) and (x) of the World Heritage Convention. Furthermore, the feasibility

study recommends the inclusion of additional 4 component parts with a total size of 1.034 Mio ha in the nomination.

The scope proposed by the Feasibility Study include 9 component parts with a total area of about 2.87 Mio ha. The workshop participants underline the urgent need for a large scale approach including further suitable areas and recommend to reduce the number of component parts by enlargement and unifying of some of them. The connectivity should be realized by a common buffer zone.

A serial site, connected by an appropriate support zone would ensure the protection of the specific natural values and ecological functions of the extensive steppe landscape as whole in the entire region. The UNESCO Biosphere reserve approach seems a suitable tool to solve the challenge of connectivity and joint management.

The added layer of visibility and protection afforded by the World Heritage Convention in combination with the UNESCO Man & Biosphere Program is the last and only chance to save these last large-scale steppes on earth from further loss and degradation.

Resolution

To enhance the protection of the Eastern Mongolian Steppes and reach success within the World Heritage Nomination process, we encourage the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of Mongolia:

1. to ensure the formal leadership in the nomination process in cooperation with the National World Heritage Committee;
2. to establish an authorized working group for the coordination and facilitation of the nomination process;
3. to identify conflicts of interests, address and mitigate threats to the proposed property such as mining, transport infrastructure, increasing livestock numbers etc. by active communication with responsible governmental institutions;
4. to decide the geographical scope of the property to be nominated including a common buffer zone for the connectivity of the component parts, based on the Feasibility Study and on new findings of the experts workshop and the field mission in July 2022;
5. to update the Eastern Mongolian Steppes in the Tentative List according to the new geographical scope and new finding latest in January 2023;
6. to improve the management of the existing protected areas and to ensure that all proposed areas have respective management plans;
7. to improve the public and political awareness on the irreplaceable values of the Eastern Mongolian Steppes by using all suitable media.

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The responsibility for the content of this document lies with the authors.