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Urgent appeal to stop the planned Naran Sevstei port – a serious threat for the Great Gobi A SPA and for the World Heritage nomination

Distinguished Mr. President,

we are writing to you as friends of Mongolia with **great concern** about the planned opening of the Naran Sevstei border crossing in the Great Gobi SPA. Since our first working visits in 1973/1978 as part of German-Mongolian cooperation in researching biological resources, we have had close personal ties to your country. We have been awarded by the Right Livelihood Award 1997 (Succow) and by the Altan Gadas of the President of Mongolia 2011 (Knapp) for our conservation work in several countries including Mongolia.

With financial support of the German Federal Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection currently the Succow Foundation gives scientific and technical support to the nomination of Eastern Mongolian Steppes and of Mongolian Gobi to the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Developing the Naran Sevstei port will dramatically impact the integrity of the largest of the four Gobi Strictly protected areas and can be expected to have a significantly negative effect on two of the most iconic and threatened of the Gobi species, which are only found in Great Gobi A. **There is a real risk that the Gobi bear and the wild camel will decline or even go extinct which would put decades of dedicated conservation work to waste.**

For the World Heritage application, allowing such large-scale infrastructure development in Great Gobi A would violate the criteria on integrity and would undermine any trust into the Mongolian government commitment to guarantee the long-term protection of the proposed nomination sites. Adding Naran Sevstei to the list of export ports to be developed **would mean the end of any ambitions to nominate the Gobi Landscapes as a World Heritage site.**

Let us explain and justify our serious concern in the following two chapters:



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Greifswald, 25.03.2024

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1) The irreplaceable value and global importance of Great Gobi SPA

* When the Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area was designated in 1975, it was the largest Protected Area worldwide. **Its designation was a milestone not only for Mongolia, but an impetus and model for the establishment of large, protected areas in the world.**

* With a total size 4.6 million hectare the part A of the Great Gobi SPA is the largest nearly unpopulated protected area in Mongolia. **Its remoteness, low human footprint, and size allows for largely undisturbed natural dynamics are of extraordinary value.**

* Life in this extreme desert environment is harsh and requires fauna and flora to develop specific adaptations to survive. Large mammals need large spaces and unobstructed access to water points if they are to survive. **Any disturbance, displacement, or human induced mortality is costly for wildlife populations living in such an extreme habitat.**

* **Great Gobi A is home to the Gobi bear - a unique evolutionary adaptation of a brown bear population to extreme desert conditions, which cannot be found anywhere else in the world.** The population is very small (numbering around some 30 animals annually) and as such highly endangered. While in the past the Gobi bears range covered the entire area of GGA and surrounding area, its range has nowadays become largely restricted to the most remote southern parts of GGA. Any additional pressures/stressors to those already existing (increasing human and livestock presence in the buffer zone, disturbance from illegal gold mining) would push the Gobi bear – a symbol of Mongolia's wild heritage - towards extinction.

* **Great Gobi A is home also to one of only two remaining populations of wild camels globally.** The wild camels need huge ranges and are extremely sensitive to disturbance. Any disturbance by vehicles tends to result in energetically costly high-speed flight behaviour over long distances. The population has shown no sign of expansion over the past decades and seems to have retreated from areas where human presence has increased near the buffer zone in the north.

* The Mongolian Gobi, with Great and Small Gobi protected areas and two adjacent mountain protected areas, are currently suggested for nomination as a serial World Natural Heritage Site. One of the key arguments for nomination on the tentative list is the fact that: Despite harsh environmental conditions **the high degree of naturalness and the sheer size of the diverse desert landscape not only provides critical habitat for an impressive range of rare, endangered, and endemic species but also for ongoing large scale animal migrations. For many of the animal species, including several large mammals, the Gobi Desert has become the last remaining global stronghold.**

2) Consequences of opening Naran Sevstei border crossing

* **Experience with opening a Naran Sevstei in 1992/93 has already demonstrated the disturbance potential of a road and associated vehicle traffic**



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in or near Great Gobi A SPA. The same issues remain today, but in an aggravated matter as development of a modern export port will require paved roads, service infrastructure, and massively increased border crossing facilities.

* **A modern export port should be economically viable and so** traffic volumes can be expected to be much higher than any regional border trade traffic in the past. It can be expected, that eventually additional infrastructure (e.g., a railroad) may be necessary to make the port economically viable, requiring further development.

* **The shortest road access to Naran Sevstei goes right through the heart of GGA and would de facto** dissect the PA and result in massive disturbance. Controlling the influx of people into GGA is challenging given the size and remoteness of GGA. The ongoing struggle to prevent illegal mining clearly illustrates this and an improved road is likely to attract even more people.

* **Alternatives routes in the border security zone along the border to avoid GGA's core zone may be perceived as having a low impact.** However, the 15 km border security zone requires special permits and is difficult to access. Human intrusion and disturbance to wildlife from this side of GGA has been absent to minimal so far. Although water is rare in this zone, wildlife – including Gobi bears and wild camels – use this area as living space.

* GGA is a true desert, and large mammals occur at low densities need to move to find enough resources to make a living. Areas beyond oasis may seem just “wastelands” but they provide habitat to avoid predators, feed, rest, give birth to young, or hibernate. **GPS tracking data and camera trap images of Gobi bears and wild camels highlight the importance of the living space between oasis, including the border security zone.**

Dear Mr. President Khurelsukh,
the opening of the Naran Sevstei would mean the end of any ambitions to nominate the Mongolian Gobi as a UNESCO World Heritage. Besides all the scientific and conservation facts it will lead to a dramatic decline in reputation and prestige of Mongolia in the world.

With the urgent appeal to stop the plans for opening the Naran Sevstei port
we remain with sincere gratitude,
your sincerely

Prof. Dr. Michael Succow
Carrier of the Right Livelihood Award

Prof. Dr. Hans D. Knapp
Carrier of the Altan Gadas Order

We send the same letter also to the Chairman of the State Great Khural

