

THE CULTURAL
SANCTUARIES
FOUNDATION



EAGLE HUNTER PROJECT REPORT MONGOLIA 2023/24

PROJECT SUMMARY

This project supports the Kazakh eagle hunting (falconer) community of Western Mongolia in celebrating and protecting their culture and their land.

To this end, we, together with our local partners, are creating a community cultural center on the outskirts of the town of Ulgii for the eagle hunting community and for visitors as a hub for documentation, protection and promotion of the Kazakh falconry traditions and the local grasslands.

CONTENTS

Project history	3
Eagle hunting tradition	5
Annual Eagle Festival.	6
Nomadic lifestyle.	8
Climate change	11
Economics	11
The need for the cultural community center	12
Rationale for the choice of Ulgii	14
Government land donation.	15
Purposes, and management, of the community center.	16
Traditional ger style	17
Project timetable and budget	18
Interviews and meetings	18
KFA and other project partners.	19
Our thanks	19

Cover image: Aitolkhyn, young eagle huntress and daughter of Dalaikhan
Opposite: Dalaikhan, champion eagle hunter and part of our project team

PROJECT HISTORY



Our personal connection with Mongolia goes back many years.

Chris has visited the country more than a dozen times over the last twenty years. It is a place that has its own heartbeat, its seemingly never-ending beauty and big skies pulling him ever back towards its landscape and culture.

Together, we visited the eagle hunter community in 2017 and again, once borders re-opened post Covid, in 2022, certain that the rich and proud eagle hunting culture and the urgent need to protect the Mongolian's vitally important grasslands make this project a perfect fit for Cultural Sanctuaries.

In this vastness, culture and conservation truly are interlinked and intertwined and interdependent - there is perhaps no greater visual representation of that connection anywhere in the world than in seeing a hunter on horseback, his magnificent golden eagle on his arm, galloping across the plains towards the horizon.

In every conversation that we have had with the community, that sense of true symbiosis was reinforced again and again.

So too was the sense that without action and support, the threats both to the eagle hunting culture and the local grasslands will remain unchecked and ever-increasing.



EAGLE HUNTING TRADITION



Father and son eagle hunters, Turarkhan and Ordabekh



Eagle hunter, Tankhai, with his eagle



Eagle hunter, Tileuberdi, with his eagle

Hunting with eagles is a traditional form of falconry found throughout the Eurasian Steppe and was practiced by ancient Khitan and Turkic peoples, with archaeologists tracing it back to the first or second millennium BC.

Today, it is practiced by Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz in contemporary Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as diasporas in Bayan-Ölgii province in Mongolia (where our project is based) and in Xinjiang in China.

During the communist period in Kazakhstan, many Kazakhs fled for Mongolia to avoid being forced to abandon

their nomadic lifestyle and sent to collective farms. They settled in Bayan-Ölgii province, which is located in the Atlas mountains of western Mongolia.

Their falconry custom involves hunting with golden eagles on horseback and to see it is to witness something remarkable. This symbiotic relationship between hunter, horse and golden eagle is truly unique.

There are currently between 300 and 400 eagle hunter families in Mongolia, all of whom live in Bayan-Ölgii province in the far West of the country. They represent about 80% of the world's eagle hunters.

EAGLE HUNTING - QUICK FACTS

Eagles are collected from the nest or as young chicks

Only female chicks are kept for hunting

The hunter then spends months training his or her eagle, in particular to respond to his or her call

The eagles are predominately used to catch foxes and hares

Each eagle stays with its hunter for a maximum of 7 years and then is released back into the wild

These majestic eagles can live to about 30 years old

ANNUAL EAGLE FESTIVAL

Each October, Kazakh eagle hunting customs are displayed at the annual Eagle Festival.

The three day-long Festival, started in 1999 by among others, Jalsa Urubshurow with whom we are working on this project, attracts more than a hundred eagle hunters who all gather just outside the town of Ulgii eager to show off their skills and the power of their relationships with their eagle.



The “chase”, Eagle Festival 2022

Alongside the eagle hunting contest itself are other traditional competitions and sports, involving hunters and their families including children of all ages and incredible horsemanship.

We attended the Festival in 2022 and saw first-hand that while clearly the Festival attracts international and domestic tourists (now slowly coming back to this remote area post Covid), it really is first and foremost for the hunters, their families and the community. It has grown year on year with more and more families getting involved and more and more young people (boys and girls) keen to become eagle hunters. It is an incredible experience and one which we recommend whole-heartedly to anyone who delights in experiencing and learning about traditional cultures and traditional lifestyles around the world.

The Festival has already achieved its purpose in celebrating the eagle hunting traditions (including techniques, clothing, tools etc) and will, we hope, continue to thrive for years to come.

THE EAGLE HUNTRESS MOVIE

Mongolian eagle hunting was thrust onto the international silver screen in 2016 with the release of *The Eagle Huntress* at the Sundance Film Festival in the US. The documentary tells the story of Aishoplan a young girl who wants to follow in the footsteps of her father and grandfather in becoming an eagle hunter and the challenges

that face her in this traditionally male dominated culture. It is a joy to watch*.

(*even if there is some criticism that it downplays the role of other eagle huntresses who went before her and even if the film had caused some frictions and jealousies within the eagle hunter community)





Champion eagle hunter

NOMADIC LIFESTYLE

Mongolia is home to one of the world's last surviving nomadic cultures and about one half of Mongolians live as traditional herders in the countryside, with the other half living in the country's capital Ulaanbaatar.

Families rely on their animals and hunting for survival and move several times a year in search of water and grass for their herds.

They live in gers (durable, waterproof, collapsible and portable – and, perhaps more surprisingly, also beautiful, warm and comfortable) which are ideally suited to Mongolia's harsh terrain and lifestyle.

MONGOLIAN GRASSLANDS AS 'UPSIDE DOWN RAINFORESTS'

“ From east to west, Mongolia's grasslands span 80 percent of the country and generate livelihoods for 200,000 families of nomadic herders. And, as the only large-scale habitat of this type in Asia, they provide a rare refuge for native wildlife such as argali sheep, gazelles, snow leopards, demoiselle cranes, cinereous vultures and saiga, a critically endangered antelope. But Mongolia's grasslands are at risk.

Growing international demand for the country's gold, coal and copper is undermining current conservation efforts, and the government is now poised to issue mining exploration licenses that could impact at least 20 percent of the country. In addition, growing demand for meat, wool and cashmere is resulting in the industrialization of Mongolia's livestock sector, impacting traditional grazing practices.

Grasslands are the planet's least protected and most altered terrestrial habitat; only 5 percent of the world's remaining grasslands are protected. In addition, among those grasslands, the Mongolian grasslands may be well situated to resist climate-related impacts such as drought and fire due to their immense size.

Of equal importance, Mongolia's grasslands are the only refuge in Asia large enough to support globally-important wildlife, such as the Mongolian gazelle – Asia's last great herd of wide-ranging mammals – and the many migratory birds that rely on these lands as a resting and refuelling stop during their long migrations.

Mongolia's grasslands are one of the planet's most critical conservation priorities – a last-chance ecosystem that must be saved for a sustainable future.”

- *The Nature Conservancy*



Dalaikhan with his eagle at the family ger

DALAIKHAN'S STORY

We stayed with Dalaikhan and his family during our 2016 visit to the area. They could not have been more generous and wonderful hosts. During our stay and over many meals and accompanied by wonderful music, Dalaikhan told us a little about himself...

Dalaikhan's family have been eagle hunters for seven generations. Although his grandfather was an unenthusiastic hunter and his father was not a hunter at all, all of his uncles were hunters and from the age of 13, Dalaikhan knew eagle hunting to be his destiny. He was, to use his term, "obsessed" with it.

In terms of the family's lifestyle, in the summer and autumn months they live in the remote valley of Baga Davaatiin Khundi in which we first met them. In the winter, they move to nearer the town of Ulgii and train for the annual Eagle Festival. In the spring, they live somewhere in between. Each transition involves moving the whole

family, their gers, their herds, their horses and their eagles.

Dalaikhan is concerned about the threats to the Kazakh culture and land and talked both of a growing natural imbalance resulting in a lack of prey for the eagles to hunt and eat and also of climate changes, with less and less snowfall in the mountains each winter and the rivers and springs becoming ever drier.

He sees tourism as being a key part of the solution to this. The Festival attracts some tourists already of course but this is just for a few days of each year and there is some concern that much of the Festival's income is not reaching the eagle hunters and their families. The community needs more support all year around. He is hugely supportive of the idea for the community center and all that it will bring with it.

Dalaikhan's two sons and his youngest, 14 year old, daughter are now eagle hunters. The tradition lives on!



CLIMATE CHANGE

The grasslands' climate is changing. As Atai, director of the KFA, told us: "With the climate warming and the glaciers melting, *everything* is changing".

The community is seeing the increasing desertification of their grasslands, a shrinking of their water supplies and an increase in landslides. One figure that we were told, but have not corroborated, is that the Mongolian grasslands have been reduced by as much as 70%.

With less grazing land for the hunters' animals, each family has no choice but to reduce the size of their herds. One sheep should ideally have about a hectare of land to graze on; it is already down to 0.6 of a hectare. Solutions must be found to be able to manage the land more sustainably in the light of the changing conditions while still allowing the nomadic families to continue their centuries old lifestyle and traditions.

ECONOMICS

Income for the eagle hunter community comes from the sale of meat and fur – from their herds and from their hunting. It is supplemented by tourism (connected with the Festival and also with visits to and homestays at the family gers).

But life is tough and, with grasslands drying and herd sizes shrinking, making ends meet is a constant struggle.

Additional revenue that the community center can generate – from visitors paying a small fee to visit the center to all the other opportunities that can be generated from it (workshops, horse-riding,

homestays, eagle displays, sales of local arts, textiles and crafts etc etc) – will be extremely welcome.

Ulgii and the surrounding area received about 25,000 domestic tourists last year and about 13,000 international tourists a year pre-Covid. If the number of annual tourists could, as is expected, reach about 40-50,000 and even a half of those visited the center, it would pay for itself very quickly. Any excess income would go to eagle hunter community-wide projects as determined by the KFA in consultation with Cultural Sanctuaries.

THE NEED FOR THE CULTURAL COMMUNITY CENTER

Those that we talked to and interviewed were unanimous in their support for the creation of a cultural community center.

No equivalent currently exists. (There is a museum in Ulgii but it is, like so many museums, about the past and not about celebration and protection of the present for the future.)

The reasons given for the need for a cultural center included that:

- it would be an important gathering place for the community and would serve to demonstrate the importance of the culture and its traditions to the local kids and youngsters
- it would highlight the link between the community and a) the eagles and b) the vast Mongolian grasslands
- it would highlight conservation and sustainability
- there is a need to protect the local traditions (clothing, tools)
- there is a need for a place to house important eagle and eagle hunter surveys and a paper and digital library for the eagle hunting culture
- it could double as a meeting place for KFA and to support the KFA work and mission
- it would complement and celebrate the annual Eagle Festival and champions
- it would bring more, much wanted, tourism – a community center would be the perfect place to showcase the culture and arts and crafts to visitors, and
- it will bring much needed revenue opportunities.

Eagle hunters at the Eagle Festival 2022





RATIONALE FOR THE CHOICE OF ULGII



Berdimurat with his eagle

Ulgii is the only choice as the location for the center.

It is the only town in which all the eagle hunters of Bayan-Ölgii province gather (the furthest coming from about 200 kilometres away). It is where they come for supplies, it is where their kids go to school, it is the governmental and political center

of the province and it is the venue for the annual Eagle Festival. It is also where many nomadic families move to and live during the harshest winter months.

Everyone that we consulted agreed that it is the only viable and effective location for a center which is intended to serve the whole of the eagle hunting community.



Champion eagle hunters

GOVERNMENT LAND DONATION

As always in each of our projects, we need Government or community land on which to build the center.

We are delighted and honoured that the Governor of Ulgii and the Land Management Departments of Ulgii and Bayan-Ölgii province have agreed to donate an appropriate plot of land for the project.

The fact that it is situated very close to the center of Ulgii and on the road from the airport to the town makes it ideal for optimising its use and effectiveness. Importantly, the plot has sufficient room not only for the main community center ger but also for two small accommodation gers, a simple barn for the hunters' horse and a simple and much smaller barn for their eagles. The Government will pay for

tree saplings to be planted around the center. It is close to sources of water and electricity (both about 200 metres away).

It is serendipitous that this community center project comes at a time when the Mongolian government has announced its intention to make the Bayan-Ölgii region the 4th most visited area for sustainable tourism in the country. This is part of the Government's 2050 Development Plan and it comes with a focus on increasing and improving the province's infrastructure as part of this strategy.

The Governor told us that he felt that the community center project would tie in very well with the wider national plans and therefore it would be enthusiastically actively supported and promoted by both national and local government officials.

PURPOSES, AND MANAGEMENT, OF THE COMMUNITY CENTER

The center will be designed to meet the needs and wishes of the local community. It will act as:

- a gathering place – for all of the eagle hunter community, their families and children
- a celebration venue – for eagle hunter champion anniversaries and a possible annual “Eagle Day”, for musical gatherings
- a conservation center – showcasing the importance of grasslands as “upside-down rainforests” in terms of their ability to sequester carbon
- a living museum of the Kazakh pastoralist and eagle hunter community culture including authentic eagle hunting traditions and artefacts
- a womens’ co-operative center for textiles and weaving
- a hub for WSCC workshops and training for local schools (including all local high school ecology clubs)
- a technology center, with WiFi, computers, cameras and video cameras for the community to use to document their culture
- a photographic center and gallery to

highlight the traditions of eagle hunting, including portraits of the eagle hunters

- a showcase for the annual Eagle Festival
- a showcase for the work of the KFA
- a place for tourists to learn about local eagle hunting traditions and about golden eagles, and
- a shop for local crafts.

The center will be economically self-sustaining. The community knows that its success is up to them and they are excited by and committed to the challenge. The current proposal is that the center will charge a small entrance fee for non-local visitors and will also charge for various workshops and activities for tourists. See section on “Economy” above.

Local schools and school children will be involved as much as possible and, we are planning a competition for local schools to come up with a logo for the community center and also to paint some of the artwork for its walls.

In terms of management, the KFA will be responsible for the operation, running and marketing of the community center as well as for its construction.

TRADITIONAL GER STYLE

The center (and everything in it) will be built, as much as is possible, by local people using local materials.

It will take the form of a large ger and will be authentic, beautiful, welcoming, accessible, useful, inspiring, popular and busy (all year round and not just at the time of the annual Eagle Festival).

The main ger will be attached to a small additional room (a combined office and storage area and toilets)

and also complemented by two small accommodation gers for short-term stays by eagle hunting families and two simple barns for horses and eagles.

The ger's interior will be decorated in traditional Kazakh style with textiles by the local women's co-operative and all woodwork by local carpenters.

Its photographic gallery will be contributed by Chris Rainier and other artwork by local artists and school children.



Traditional family gers. Our community center will be a much larger version of this

PROJECT TIMETABLE AND BUDGET

We would ideally like to see the new center up and running in time for this year's Eagle Festival in October. If we can raise the necessary funds in time to place the order for the main ger by August 2023, this will be achievable.

INTERVIEWS AND MEETINGS

We have discussed the project with all of the following:

- Atai, Director of the Golden Eagle Association and KFA board member
- Bekbolat ("Bek"), Director of Altai Expeditions and KFA board member
- Buya, associate at Nomadic Expeditions and KFA board member
- Nyambayar Batbayar, Director of The Wildlife Sciences and Conservation Center of Mongolia and KFA board member
- Nurgulan, head of the Food and Agricultural Agency of Bayan-Ölgii province and KFA board member
- Ayashgul, head of Ulgii Museum and KFA board member
- Tseveemyadag, leading ornithologist in Mongolia, Golden Eagle Association board member and KFA board member
- Umerbek, head of Mongolia Altai petroglyphic protection agency and KFA board member
- Jasla Urubshurow, Undraa Buyannemekh and Anand, all of Nomadic Expeditions
- Edilkhan Khonisbay, Director of the Eagle Association
- Bauyrjan Daljal, Governor of Bayan-Ölgii province

...and, last but not least, with a number of champion falconers and their families including:

- Dalaikhan, his sons Bigtas and Alphamus and his daughter Aitolkhyn and Bigtas' wife Bazargul, all in Baga Davaatiin Khundi valley (see page 9)
- Amentai and his sons Ersanat and Erjanand, also in Baga Davaatiin Khundi valley
- Shaimurat in Erget valley
- Sailov and Bovurjan in Hosterik valley, and
- indirectly via the KFA, a further 45 eagle hunters at the 2022 Eagle Festival.

KFA AND OTHER PROJECT PARTNERS



Meeting with leading KFA representatives

Our lead project partner is the Kazakh Falconry Association. The KFA was founded in October 2021 by the Environment and Tourism Agency of Bayan-Ölgii province, the WSCC and Nomadic Expeditions. Its 13 board members represent a wide cross-section of the community.

The Association's main objectives are to protect falconry traditions, to protect the golden eagles and to raise awareness of eagle hunting traditions among the local and national youth as well as internationally.

Alongside the KFA, we are also working with:

- Nomadic Expeditions whose founder Jalsa Urubshurow also co-founded the annual Eagle Festival and is a global leader in the promotion and protection of the Kazakh eagle hunting and other Mongolian cultural traditions;
- The Wildlife Sciences and Conservation Center of Mongolia, the country's leading conservation organisation; and
- the Government of the town of Ulgii and of Bayan-Ölgii province.

OUR THANKS

Our thanks go to all those donors to The Cultural Sanctuaries Foundation who have so generously supported this project to date and enabled us to get to this crucial stage. In particular, we would like to highlight Linklaters LLP, Sven and Kristin Lindblad's Wanderlust Foundation and the Magid family's Marble Foundation.

Our thanks also go to all the eagle hunters

and community members who have given us their time to discuss and support the project. We hope that the center proves to be all that you wish for it.

In particular, none of this would be possible without the team at Nomadic Expeditions and without Atai, Bek and the rest of the board of the KFA. We are looking forward to working with them all in the years to come.





Bigtas, champion eagle hunter and son of Dalaikhan; this image features as The Cultural Sanctuaries Foundation's global logo



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