

In Mongolia, awareness about pollution needs to be boosted to prevent further degradation

Old ways can't keep up with new waste

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View of Gobi Desert at sunset, Mongolia. Image by Khaliun Ganbaatar, courtesy of The Nature Conservancy. Used with permission.

With an area of 1.5 million square kilometers, Mongolia is among the largest countries on Earth, ranking [18th in size](#). Its vast land encompasses pristine boreal forests, mountainous ecosystems, and several types of grasslands known as steppe. Inhabited by [3.3 million people](#), Mongolia is also one of most sparsely populated countries in the world, which makes it a good choice for biodiversity conservation.

However, over the past three decades, Mongolia's environment has been facing multiple threats, including [mining](#) and infrastructure development, [overgrazing](#), [fossil fuel exploitation](#), [desertification](#), and [climate change](#) that manifests as unprecedented increases in air temperatures and abnormal pattern in precipitation.

Climate change is impacting [forage](#) reserves, the composition of plants, and the diversity of the [rangelands](#). Likewise, it has led to a constant increase of

natural disasters like drought and [dzud](#), a harsh climatic situation that causes mass death of livestock either due to starvation or extreme cold. An additional source of pollution is the day-to-day activities of people, and their approach to the environment.



River bed filled with plastic and glass bottles. Photo by Amedeo Bastiano, used with permission.

For example, it is common to find empty vodka bottles in the riverbeds that turn dry in the summer. On the hills, there are altars of plastic packages and cans standing next to the real altars erected to pray to the sky god [Tenger](#), a key figure in Mongolian shamanistic beliefs. Outside the villages, in the middle of the steppe, you can find open-air landfills. Just a few kilometers from their houses, the inhabitants of those villages amass the waste they produce during the winter and burn it. In the surroundings, it is possible to see residues of deformed plastic for many months after.

According to a local expert, the root cause of this is the lack of environmental awareness among the Mongolian people. Batsuren S. is a 37-year-old environmental engineer who graduated from one of the top Mongolian universities and completed specialised graduate studies at a famous institute in Southeast Asia, where she now works as a researcher. She asked to keep her last name and the name of her alma mater confidential. She explains:

People in Mongolia don't realize that their actions have consequences. If they leave a bottle in a meadow, this bottle may reach a river, or be eaten by a yak and cause its death. But people are not educated to think this way. They just say: "I want to have a beer," or some vodka, or some water. And they drink, then leave the bottle in the grass.

Mongolians are a [young people](#) — which means they aren't fully self-aware, at a social level, and don't have a deep understanding of how vulnerable nature is, Batsuren claims, linking the issue to a recent change in lifestyle:

People here have been almost exclusively nomads until a few decades ago. They started gathering in cities only recently, and even nowadays, approximately half of the population lives in the traditional nomadic way. In the past, nomads' trash could be abandoned in nature without worrying too much. It consisted of carcasses of animals, furs, wood, and natural fabric used for clothing. After a few weeks, the environmental agents would consume it and let it return to what it was before without any damage for the soil.

Nowadays, the waste has changed and turned into glass, plastic, metal, gasoline, chemicals. But for people who don't know the dangers related to them, understating the impact of dumping these products in nature isn't as simple.

According to Gala Davaa from the NGO [The Nature Conservancy](#), most of the people are aware about climate change, to a certain degree. Especially the younger generations. As he explains:

A part of the new ruling class of Mongolia is extremely concerned about it. And the herder communities also understand that some change is happening. They observe nature every day, and see that it behaves differently from the past. A lot of information is circulating through the internet. However, the institutions aren't reaching out to the public in systematic way. And while people do agree on the importance of protecting nature, they still have a limited understanding of the ways to do so.

As he explains, in 1998, the Mongolian government approved a [Public Ecological Education Program](#), to be implemented between 1998 and 2005. But nobody put up a plan to translate it into concrete actions for long-term results, thus the positive but uneven results that were obtained initially are now fading out.

According to Gala:

Between 2019 and 2020, the government designated 32 new protected areas, for a total of 4.9 million hectares. It also [committed](#) to put under national protection 30 percent of the country's total land. They already achieved the result of [protecting](#) 21 percent of it, which equals to almost 33 million hectares. On top of this, 31 additional million hectares are now [designated](#) as locally protected areas. All this took a lot of effort, yet, because of the absence of an organic program to spread information, many people remain uneducated, even among the scientific community. The country suffers [from] the lack of a science-based nature conservation approach, and the public tends to oversimplify matters related to the environment.

For both Batsuren and Gala, the only way the situation can improve is by changing the mentality of the people. And for this to happen, institutions and the government have to commit to a policy of improved environmental education.

As Batsuren concludes, “they [the government] need to keep launching extensive information campaigns, spread awareness more evenly and systematically, and push people to give more attention to the environment.”