



Forest users reverse Mongolian deforestation

WORKING FOR herders in five Mongolian provinces

WORKING WITH Government of Mongolia

WORKING TO improve forest management and improve livelihoods of herders

WORKING THANKS TO Government of the Netherlands funding

REVERSING DEFORRESTATION

Gone are the days when herders in forested areas of Mongolia had to stand by helplessly in the face of illegal logging or expanded mining operations. Today, thanks to an FAO project that has given local forest herders communities the right to monitor, protect and manage their own forests, not only has Mongolia reversed this trend of forest loss in pilot areas, it has actually seen regeneration of forest areas. New growth of young larch trees now visibly advance down the hillsides.

Although mention of Mongolia conjures images of nomadic herders on grassy but treeless steppes, in reality, the country has a 12 percent forest cover. Considering that Mongolia is the nineteenth largest country in the world, this represents a sizeable forest area of more than 10 million hectares. As with other countries in transition from planned to market-based economies, such as those of Central Asia, the beginning of the economic transition in the mid-1990s resulted in the collapse of the forestry sector and had a disastrous impact on Mongolia's forests. By the early 2000s, illegal logging, arson, expansion of mining and increasing cattle herds encroaching into the forest were causing loss of some 400 square kilometers of forest every year.

Today, it's a different picture, one in which forest rangers on horseback who patrol the forested hills have become a familiar sight. They are members of forest user groups established by local authorities with the support of FAO as part of a participatory forest management project. The rangers maintain a continuous lookout for scenes that indicate illegal logging activities while checking for forest fires or any other disturbances. Without a doubt, the project has changed the way Mongolians interact with their forests.



REVERSING DEFORESTATION



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Local management

The project has established 16 forest user groups in the five provinces where it works. With guidance from FAO, the user groups increase the capacity of local people to manage and use their forests. Group members receive training in forest assessment, mapping, management planning and in the marketing of forest products. With this new knowledge, the user groups develop their own forest management plans, according to what they perceive as their community's specific needs and goals. For example, if the management plan includes cutting dead trees, then it can also call for selling the wood as timber or fuelwood, thus providing income for the group. Management plans can also determine who has rights in the forest for gathering or harvesting forest products for sale in local markets, control grazing to protect natural regeneration, and support planting of new trees.

When illegal logging was at its height, the forests also were being struck by arsonists. Local people not only had to deal with deforestation and loss of forest resources, they also had to deal with the environmental consequences. Loss of forest cover reduced rainfall absorption, increased runoff and soil erosion, lowered the water table and, as a result, streams and rivers dried up— it was devastating for the herders who depend on water for their livelihoods.

Today, it's a different story. Thanks to their training in forest management, they have proudly taken full responsibility for the protection of their forests.

Members patrol as forest rangers to ensure that their management plans are being implemented as designed.

This community involvement in forest management has also led to community cooperation in other areas. For example, some families will watch all the community's herds so that other families can concentrate on the harvest and, in the end, they share the yield.



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Three-way trust

In the big picture, a project such as this is built on three-way trust that involves the mutual respect of the forest user groups, the FAO project staff and the government. Project staff work very closely with the government. Its offices are located within the Forest Agency of the Mongolian Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism in the capital, and within the offices of the Environment, Protection and Tourism Agency in the provinces where it supports user groups. This enables open communication between staff and key government officials, contributing to building a trusting relationship. Having this close relationship with the government has also enabled the project to participate in developing a more supportive policy and legal framework for participatory forest management – one that provides tangible rights to forest user groups, enables them to react to unexpected problems and allows them to take advantage of emerging opportunities.

As a result, the project's impact can be seen in more than forest regeneration. The goals of the pilot project included scaling-up the project to national level to give all Mongolians a stake in their forests. That plan is proceeding – even ahead of the "official" scaling-up activities. Forest users who are not part of the current pilot areas are voluntarily starting user groups on their own and are receiving support from experienced forest user groups to establish themselves, indicating that the project has helped embed the concepts of participatory forest management in the fabric of Mongolian forest management and among Mongolia's forest users.