



Western Mongolia, goats around a yurt © Katiekk

# Guardians of the Steppe

## Eternal Mongolia: a Lifeline for Nature and Culture

Mongolia's grand landscapes hold an abundance of natural beauty - rolling hills that rise like waves, rugged mountains dark against the horizon, and sand dunes that abut open prairies. These ecosystems have endured for millennia but today, their future stands at a tipping point. Mongolia is a place where the impacts of climate change and habitat loss hit hard, where centuries of nomadic herding traditions intersect with the country's desire to grow and modernise. The challenge is clear: Balancing economic opportunity, cultural heritage, and ecological survival.

In response, the Government of Mongolia partnered with The Nature Conservancy to develop Eternal Mongolia, a PFP agreement that closed in April 2024, committing U.S.\$198 million to conservation over 15 years. Donor funding is managed by the Mongolian Nature's Legacy Foundation (MNLFF), a newly established conservation trust fund created under the PFP, with a broader mandate to mobilize financing for Mongolia's conservation priorities. Nearly two years into implementation, Eternal Mongolia is laying a solid foundation for future success. The initiative aims to protect the country's landscapes while honoring generations of traditional knowledge and supporting sustainable livelihoods. Its vision is sweeping: Safeguard an additional 14 million hectares of pristine grasslands, forests, deserts, wetlands, and rivers; enhance management of 48 million hectares of national protected areas; and promote climate-resilient practices across 34 million hectares of community-managed lands.

**This is not just conservation - it is a lifeline for ecosystems and culture alike.**

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**“The PFP approach enables us to move beyond short-term projects and address systemic conservation challenges through long-term vision, planning, and financing that strengthen policies and institutions over time. In the first year of the Eternal Mongolia PFP, we have built strong institutional and governance foundations for the long-term success of both the trust fund and the PFP, while initiating critical reforms together with our partners.”**

**Nomindari Enkhtur, CEO, Mongolian Nature’s Legacy Foundation**

Since its launch, Eternal Mongolia has moved quickly, directly supporting progress toward Mongolia’s national goal of protecting 30% of its territory. The Mongolian Nature’s Legacy Foundation is now fully operational, with core policies established, active Board oversight and grant portfolio, and the first grants issued in a significant step toward sustainable conservation financing. In the program’s first year, a comprehensive assessment of 4.8 million hectares of local protected areas evaluated their potential for upgrading. 17 areas, covering 2.4 million hectares, have already received local government endorsement.

Through Eternal Mongolia funding, the program has also delivered a review of all 41 Protected Area administrations, examining management plans, annual reports, and financial records. This produced Mongolia’s first national integrated database of protected areas, and a baseline framework to improve their effectiveness – the first step to consistent systems of shared knowledge and standards that will shape Mongolia’s conservation future. Meanwhile, a landmark Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Finance integrated results-based budgeting into the national public finance system, linking budget allocations to measurable conservation outcomes and long-term impact.

The first grants from the Mongolian Nature’s Legacy Foundation are now delivering impacts. Among the early beneficiaries is Khomiin Taliin Takhi, a non-government organization safeguarding Mongolia’s iconic takhi, or Przewalski’s horse. Once believed to be extinct in the wild, the takhi is the world’s last true wild horse and a powerful symbol of resilience on the steppe. These horses have only survived thanks to decades of dedicated conservation and reintroduction efforts, led by organisations such as Khomiin Taliin Takhi. Today’s growing populations underscore the importance of long-term protection and the critical role local communities play in safeguarding this iconic species. Through Eternal Mongolia funding, Khomiin Taliin Takhi is able to expand its work and impact.



In Khövsgöl Province, Mongolia, Narantuya Tseren milks her family’s dairy cows. © TNC/Matthieu Paley

For centuries, nomadic herders have lived in harmony with Mongolia's ecosystems, moving with the seasons, tending their livestock, and honoring traditions passed down through generations. But today, human impacts and desertification threaten this ecosystem and the balance that sustained generations is unraveling. Overgrazing, development, and climate change are stripping the land bare, leaving livestock and wildlife with little to eat and irreparably harming biodiversity. About three-quarters of Mongolia's grasslands have been overgrazed, their health worsened by climate change. Winters have become increasingly severe and in 2024 alone, 8.1 million animals perished, unable to burrow through deep snow to reach the grass beneath.



Ch. Altansukh, a Mongolian herder from the Bayanzurkh soum of Khuvsgol province, was “born into herding” in 1960 and has maintained his family’s herding traditions throughout his life © TNC

**“Every valley had water when I was young, If we don’t interact properly with nature, big changes could come in 10 or 20 years. When I was young, our soum was alive with water, forests, and animals. But year after year, the rivers dried, trees were cut down, and wildlife became rare. That’s when we realized, we herders must stand for nature and the environment. We are the guardians.”**

**Ch. Altansukh, herder from Bayanzurkh soum in Khuvsgol province**

Altansukh joined one of the trainings supported through Eternal Mongolia, where herding communities learned about pasture management, nature conservation, and the impacts of climate change. For him, these lessons are not abstract, but urgent - if land is lost, so is the herders’ very way of life.

The story of Mongolia's grasslands is a story of resilience. Altansukh captures the essence of Eternal Mongolia - that conservation is not just a government mandate or an international goal but a shared responsibility, rooted in culture and community. Eternal Mongolia offers hope, but it is a race against time, as climate change accelerates and economic pressures mount. For herders like Altansukh, the stakes are deeply personal. Their livelihoods, identities, and futures are tied to the land. Protecting Mongolia's ecosystems is about sustaining life and creating a future where nature and culture thrive together.

Eternal Mongolia is not just about policies and hectares. It is about people, especially the herders for whom land and life are inseparable. Among them is Ch. Altansukh, a herder from Bayanzurkh soum in Khuvsgol province. Born into herding in 1960, Altansukh has maintained his family's traditions for decades. He has witnessed the steppe's transformation firsthand. Ch. Altansukh, a Mongolian herder from the Bayanzurkh soum of Khuvsgol province, was “born into herding” in 1960 and has maintained his family's herding traditions throughout his life. Altansukh is part of the herding community supporting and leveraging the work of Eternal Mongolia, which aims to support sustainable livelihoods alongside large-scale protection.




Summer pasture in Mongolia © Nurmukhamed Battur

## Lessons From Early Implementation

Early implementation of Eternal Mongolia has already revealed the importance of building broad public understanding of conservation outcomes, especially when policy or legislative change is required. Strengthening support for protected areas among everyday Mongolians helps create the conditions for government action and long-term political commitment. To that end, three targeted campaigns are now underway, some focused on raising awareness among the general public, and others designed to more directly reach and inform key decision-makers. Together, these efforts aim to ensure that future steps in policy, planning, and protected area expansion are supported by a well-informed and engaged society.

Another key lesson is the value of strong transitional support for both government partners and the conservation trust fund as the PFP model takes effect. Eternal Mongolia introduces new roles, mechanisms, and shared responsibilities across institutions - shifts that require time, capacity, and guidance to fully take hold. Early-stage capability and institutional strengthening are essential to building confidence, alignment, and effective collaboration. Investing in this support during early implementation establishes the foundation for a durable, resilient system capable of delivering the project's long-term conservation goals.

A large herd of Mongolian sheep and goats is grazing in a mountainous pasture in western Mongolia, Bayan Olgii province. The scene is set in a rugged, mountainous landscape with steep, brownish hills and a cloudy sky. The foreground is filled with a dense herd of sheep and goats, some with dark wool and some with lighter, brownish wool. The background shows a vast, open landscape with a few small structures and a large rock formation. The overall atmosphere is one of a traditional, pastoral setting in a high-altitude region.

Mongolian sheep and goats are grazing in the pasture in western Mongolia, Bayan Olgii province © Wirestock