

Building Sand Castles on the Steppe? Mining, Herding and Water Governance in the Gobi

By Jennifer Lander



The Gobi desert occupies around 1.3 million square kilometres of the Palearctic eco-region, a 'transitional zone' of desert-steppe terrain, where grasslands merge with the Alashan Plateau. A fragile and dynamic environment, the Gobi's mood is notoriously temperamental. Temperatures can plunge overnight, boasting over thirty degrees Celsius in summer and negative forty degrees in the winter.

For me, nothing encapsulates the Gobi more than its ghost: that wind whose curse and croon echoes on and on, over the steppes, those dunes, the sturdy tussocks, over the heads of the goats, the sheep and the camels. Take the Trans-Siberian rail from Beijing at least as far as Ulaanbaatar and meander through a singular route of the region, from the sand dunes of Sainshand through to the steppe-like prairies of the middle and upper Gobi. Drive out of the towns and stand silent a while and let the horizon disorient your perspective – your citified vision – briefly.

Outer Mongolia exists in the imagination of most visitors as a frontier land, a wilderness. In particular, the Gobi evokes an impression of bleak desolation. But for centuries, semi-nomadic herders have navigated the Gobi's feisty temperament and found a home there. It is not an easy life, especially if you're accustomed to urban comforts. Harsh winters bring animals to their knees foraging for the smallest shoots of vegetation deep underneath the snow. The summers don't always bring enough rain. Herders carefully watch for water levels in wells and streams, and maintain adequate shelters for the winter months. Camels, goats, and sheep – the hardy ones – can survive here, guided to summer and winter pastures. These watchful semi-nomadic movements, like figure-eights on a windswept dance floor, appease the Gobi to continue offering her seemingly endless horizon as a home and dwelling place. There has been hardship and happiness here, like any place, but also life. The green shoots poke their heads up through that desert steppe most summers, new goat kids and baby camels are born here, and little children totter or play-wrestle in front of felt-wrapped gers.

Read the full article [here](#)

Jennifer Lander: Why I Write



How would you categorise the writing?

I would characterise the writing as creative-investigative. It is based on research that I conducted whilst in Mongolia and is in that sense investigative - seeking to understand a particular situation (control over water resources in context of mining development) more comprehensively and gathering different perspectives to inform the overall shape of the narrative. That requires attention to the facts, to weighing the evidence, gained from a variety of sources. But I wrote the piece in the hope of help the reader to "see" - both intellectually and emotionally - the necessity of considering questions of justice in decision-making around water.

Why did you write the piece?

I wrote the piece to counter the dominant narrative about the Gobi as "blank" land whose main value lies in its resource value to investors and the state. This sounds sort of abstract, but I wanted to "place" the Gobi, to emphasise that it has a life of its own - environmentally speaking - and different groups of people have different relationships with it too. Also, I wanted to highlight the lack of data available regarding the environmental viability of widespread mining in Mongolia. Herders are regularly portrayed as lacking knowledge and being overly anxious about water, but the reality is that decision-makers also lack critical information and yet are still committed to promoting mining as the national development strategy. The irony is that the one indisputable fact about water levels in Mongolia is that they are low; furthermore, the land is prone to desertification and mining is a water-intensive industry. It is clearly in the extractive interest, both state and corporate, to label herders' concerns as "misinformed"... While the state would like to portray itself as making "professional" and "rational" decisions about the mining sector, I wanted to suggest that extractivism is more political than most proponents would like to admit.

What do you think makes it an effective piece of writing?

Personally, the aspect that I think is most effective about this piece (apart from Sven's fantastic photos which are more articulate than words) is the personification of the Gobi, and the direct invitation to the reader to imagine for themselves. It describes my own imaginary too; in order to invite others in, I needed to establish a sense of my own presence in the narrative. It was a vulnerable exercise in a way, as a writer. I think this is what distinguishes the piece overall from a classic investigative piece of writing; it is more personal and poetic in tone.