

Wild and Wilderness West of Mongolia

It was around 4pm of the fourth day of November 2007 or the third day of our field work in the wild west of Mongolia. I use the terminology of “wild west” not for its acknowledged beauty just to imitate the America of 1850s. It is in fact the wildest place in Mongolia certainly where you can not find any soul of human beings for miles and miles around you. As very much experienced ranger, Gantulga our driver and at the same time professional inspector, has noticed vultures flying high seemingly looking for fresh kill and we moved to the site and found two khulans, wild ass *Equus hemionus*. They



used to be the most beautiful representatives of quadrupeds, but now they were killed and back legs were brutally cut off. The two khulans were lying at distance about 80 meters from each other. It seemed to me kind of scene from horror movie. Environmental inspectors, two Gantulga have immediately started all the investigations documenting the scene and looking for evidence to find the poachers. Mr. Ganbaatar, Police Officer who joined our trip

to help us particularly for dealing with law enforcement was also very active and we have defined where the poachers were hiding, how they have chased, what kind of transport mean did they use etc. I was surprised to know how many things one can get with only tracks and signs.

Their conclusion was that the poachers are still not far from the crime scene given the freshness of the kill and even they might be hiding somewhere looking at us and waiting us to leave the scene or when darkness comes. Therefore, we showed a move that we are leaving the crime scene and found some place to hide and started to wait. Soon, short winter day (it was 4 November) has finished and suddenly Ganbaatar has noticed red light apparently rear light of motorbike in front of us and as he mentioned about this I have seen the second glow of the light. We have still waited for some time and then decided to move with our own light off. It was for me very interesting to know what reason has motivated our friends move to a particular direction, not knowing exactly where alleged bike did move. Later I understood that there was only one possible direction to where the bike will move while hiding from us. But I was reminding myself always that we do not know whether there was bike or something else, because we were moving based only on our guess and judgment of the situation. About 1 and half hour we have slowly moved and then reached, now already very dark, sandy hills which for motorbikes particularly for Chinese made bikes with thin tires will create huge difficulties. Remember, inspectors have identified the type of tire of motorbike. It was kind of good surprise for us because it would ease our supposed “chase”. Suddenly we clearly saw rear light of the bike, now real and asked the people on it to stop so they did.

There were 2 young men very much like ordinary herders who were looking for livestock, ropes around their neck etc. Usually big animals like camel and horse are left without guarding so from time to time the owners would go for looking and checking the animals if everything is fine with them. It should be exciting event for the guys given the wilderness of the place, but somehow to me it seemed that the young guys were not very much excited with our presence. Anyway,



Poachers of Khulan in field

police officer and two inspectors have started their investigations with few questions and soon revealed that the two have killed one khulan apparently not the ones we found. Then we moved to a place where they have hiding their rifle and also meat they took from khulan. Finally we came to a place where one khulan was shot to death and certainly documented everything. Yes, it was not a place where we have found two carcasses but some 4 kms away from already known to us place. Now 3 khulans dead and 2 poachers are involved, plus some poachers should be revealed. We have discussed what to do next and made our own picture what have happened. We have concluded that the poachers who killed two khulans, carcasses of which we found and the ones we arrested are somehow linked. Then we moved to small settlement named Altansoyombo and reached the place around 12 pm. While we came to the place police officer and two inspectors



Poachers of Khulan in Altan Soyombo small settlement.

immediately noticed motorbikes of which tire print was similar to ones we found and documented. Then started all the police and inspecting works and by around 1 am we already knew the poachers by name and have asked all to come to a place where we have temporarily based for the night. Until 3 am in the morning we worked with the poachers and confiscated 3 rifles, 3 motorbikes and also the meat taken from the khulans. Next morning we have sent the poachers to the soum center under command of the governor of the bag,

administrative unit.

The most exciting thing to me was that everything we have guessed on what mean of transport they used, where they did hide etc. was true which really made me to appreciate and thank our friends for their professionalism.

So, as we have guessed the poaching has happened in this way. One man has noticed a day before the poaching, some khulans informed about this to his friends. Next morning they came to the place and probably around late afternoon found 5 khulans. As the poachers were separated into two groups, one with 2 and the other one with 4 men, one can easily guess it was a planned action. First group of 4 killed 2 khulans first and 3 others frightened straight run to the other two men and one was shot by them. What surprised me was that the poachers took only piece of meat from three khulans which all

would not equal to even half of meat that can be taken from one khulan which means they were not in desperate need in use of wildlife. Rather it was just fun or desire to have something with no paying anything.

During this trip we have covered almost 2000 km in Russian jeep and confiscated 4 rifles, 109 marmot skins. In addition we have revealed 3 cases of illegal saxaul harvesting within the territory of protected area – Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area and transferred the cases to the police agency.



According to ecological cost approved by the Government Resolution No.248 of 2005, the khulan poachers should face a fine totaling of 21 mln tugrogs equal to around 19,000 USD and motorbikes and rifles the poachers used will be confiscated.

This trip gave me a lot of thoughts on our work particularly with Anti-poaching unit on how it should be operating, who should be involved, how important is awareness work and how we should cooperate with the local people etc. Also, I have realized how dangerous is the Anti-poaching unit work, how they are unsafe against the poachers with guns and how much they need in terms of equipments etc.

Overall, I am very much satisfied with what we are doing for conservation of our wilderness. At the same time I have also realized how vulnerable is this wilderness west if we would let the poachers behave as today and how much we need our donors' support for good job.

Information related to poaching incident:

Members of the Anti-poaching Unit "Irves – 3"

Mr. Gantulga Sh., APU Leader, Senior Environmental Inspector, former Police Officer - Major

Mr. Gantulga, M., APU Member, Environmental Inspector, Driver

Mr. Ganbaatar, Ts., Police Officer, Lt., GobiAltai Province, Tugrog soum

Mr. Batbold D., Conservation Director, WWF Mongolia PO

Poachers: Residents of Altansoyombo bagh', Tonkhil Soum, Gobi Altai Province

Mr. Jargalsaikhan, M.,

Mr. Batsaikhan, Ts.,

Mr. Zorigoo, O.,

Mr. Otgonbayar, S.,

Mr. Bayarsaikhan, B.,

Mr. Otgon, O.,

Place where poaching has occurred:

Serten Mountain Range, Bayankhairkhan –

Approximately at: N45°34'

E093°06'