

An Assessment of the Protected Areas of the Eastern Steppe of Mongolia

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Abstract

An assessment of the status of the ten Protected Areas in the Eastern Steppe of Mongolia was conducted during the summer of 2004. A method designed to satisfy international standards was adapted and used to complete the assessments. The assessment consisted of a review of current information along with field visits to each of the ten areas as well as potential new protected areas. Qualitative biological and administrative information was collected, interviews conducted, threats identified, and recommendations developed. In general, the habitats of the areas were found to be largely intact, if stressed to varying degrees, but wildlife populations appeared to be low and decreasing. Threats identified included excessive off-take of animals and plants (both legal and illegal), overgrazing by livestock, wildfires, drought, and mining. Recommendations were developed for the Protected Areas in general, as well as for individual areas.

Key words: assessments, Mongolia, protected areas, threats

Introduction

Protected areas (PAs) are considered the key to global biodiversity preservation. PAs provide habitat for rare and endangered species, enable natural ecological processes to function, and offer recreational, cultural, and spiritual opportunities for people. While PAs are expected to be maintained in a natural and pristine state forever, it is now obvious that PAs around the world are under attack from a wide variety of threats, and that many are not meeting their management objectives (Dudley *et al.* 2004). This has led to efforts to develop standards to assess and monitor PAs and their management, in particular by the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) and their Management Effectiveness Task Force.

There are currently 56 protected areas in Mongolia. Ten of these are located in the eastern aimags (states/provinces) of Dornod, Sukhbaatar, and Khentii, an area informally known as the Eastern Steppe. Most of this area's habitat is referred to as steppe (grassland), although other habitats occur, particularly in the extreme east and north portions where forests are found. The Eastern

Steppe is considered to be the world's largest intact grassland, and it is famous for its large herds of migrating Mongolian gazelles (*Procapra gutturosa*) and other rare and unusual species.

The collapse of Mongolia's centralized government in the early 1990s and emergence of a democratic, free-market society is resulting in significant cultural and economic changes, many of which impact PA resources directly and indirectly. It is important for data to be collected regarding these changes and the potential and real threats they present to the PA system in Mongolia, so that reasonable and effective management decisions can be made. Therefore it was determined to conduct a formal assessment of the ten PAs found on the Eastern Steppe region. This assessment is in accordance with the recent (February 2004) adoption by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) of a "Programme of Work" on Protected Areas (Decision VII/28 of the seventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, on Protected Areas, (see <http://biodiv.org/decisions/default.aspx?m=COP-07&id=7765&lg=0>). As a signatory to the CBD, Mongolia can consider itself to be in partial com-