

Marc Shapiro  
Spring '09 Internship Reflection  
July 31, 2009

The smell of sweet soot and gasoline is the first thing I noticed upon stepping out of the pressure vessel into Ulaanbaatar. I arrived near midnight, delirious and weary after a few days of travel, but excited to be standing on what to me was a different planet. I went inside and grabbed my bags and the adventure began.

For the next two months I would be working with BioRegions International a non-profit organization started to “empower the nomadic cultures of Mongolia to survive in a rapidly-changing world.” As I quickly learned upon arrival, Mongolia is rapidly modernizing. The capital city of Ulaanbaatar is a potpourri of foreign objects, looking a bit like a quilt of many other nations sewn together with Mongolian culture. China and Russia are quickly investing in the rich mineral deposits that have lain dormant under Mongolian bedrock. Electricity lines are spreading like spider webs, extending farther each year. There is cell phone service in the most remote corners of the country.

All of this development is starkly contrasted by the traditional nomadic culture that has remained largely unchanged in the last eight hundred years. Without romanticizing too much, Mongolia is one of the last places in the world where much of the population is still actually nomadic. Even throughout the Soviet Union, Mongolia retained its rich traditions and customs.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, animal numbers have spiraled out of control and grazing habits have become lax. The countryside now looks like a very well manicured golf lawn, at times simply a desert. I could not understand how a country with that much space was overgrazed, but I soon saw that most families rely solely on their animals for both food and

livelihood. Rather than produce fewer better animals, most herder's rely on having as many animals as possible and using only the best.

BioRegions is trying to fill a void where the Soviet Union used to be, though in a very different way. BioRegions was started in 1999 by Montana State University professor Cliff Montagne '69 under the more general idea that people in similar "bioregions," any area where humans and nature intersect, across the globe are encountering similar problems and would benefit from sharing ideas. Cliff began traveling to the same region in Mongolia every summer, sharing thoughts and building connections. He began to bring colleagues and students along to learn about the Mongolian lifestyle while doing projects that would benefit both the student and the herders.

My initial attraction to BioRegions was less the actual work they were doing, but rather the manner in which it was done. Cliff is a professor of "Holistic Management," a unique process in which one always takes into account the "whole" when making decisions. Cliff embraces the idea that everything is connected, with any action affecting some piece of everything else.

BioRegions focuses on trying to support the people of the Darhad, not just give them aid. To me, BioRegions was one of the first organizations I saw that acted with humility and sustainability in their practice. I wanted to learn about how Cliff does his work and the realities of working as a foreigner in a non-profit organization.

Cliff understood my interest and had a similar idea in terms of my function. In all the years that BioRegions has been traveling to Mongolia, Cliff and his wife Joan have been the only two to oversee all the projects and operations on the ground. He was interested in having someone as an understudy of sorts, an apprentice of holistic management. I would have my own project regarding tourism in the Darhad, but I would also help BioRegions as an organization.

Cliff and I met for the first time in Seoul, South Korea. After the last three-hour jaunt, we moved into Ulaanbaatar, the capital city, and spent a week preparing for the upcoming month in the countryside. With the help of Badmaa and Sunjee, part of BioRegions' Mongolian staff, we began the plan to logistics and roles of the other students arriving in three weeks. While I still felt awkward in my amoebic role, I began to find some ground in organizing Cliff's thoughts and plans. He may be a brilliant man, but there were so many things going on he had trouble keeping everything together. I went with him to meetings all over the city with various Mongolians, expats, and foreign aid workers.

The city and its cacophony was overwhelming at first, but it soon grew on me like a runner's high. The more time I spent walking around the more interesting and wondrous the city became. That and my language was improving so I could get a cup of tea if I needed it.

At the end of the week, we started the 36-hour van ride to the Darhad in an old Russian Forgan, the standard issue van for the entire country. On this ride, I became acquainted with what's known as Mongolian time. We broke down somewhere along the Mongolian steppe about five hours east of a town called Murun. Wires melted from some short within the alternator. Twenty-four hours later, a mechanic drove out and helped us. Nothing moves quickly in Mongolia, a reality one must fully embrace before being able to work.

For the first two weeks in the countryside, Cliff, Sunjee and I met with as many people as possible from all parts of the Darhad. With only three people we had an easier time moving around. I turned into a scribe, recording the content of his meetings with various town governors, local entrepreneurs, and various other people. I was struck by the hospitality of the people we met. Upon entering any home, we would be given hot milk tea and bread almost immediately. No matter how wealthy or poor a family, we were greeted with food and kindness. I always felt

pretty embarrassed, but I learned that this was a source of pride for Mongolians, and learned to accept thankfully.

Once the other students arrived on June 1<sup>st</sup>, life became extremely chaotic. Whereas we had been three or four traveling around lightly and (relatively) quickly, now we were fifteen traveling with a cook, a generator, and loads of project materials. We moved out to an area around twenty-six families who are the pilot user-group for many of the projects. At this point, I began to focus on my role as a “geotourism” organizer and less as Cliff’s apprentice. Through interviews with the various families, I wrote up “Geotourism Guidelines” for the Darhad, a multi-lingual document for tourists coming into the Valley. Eventually, the document will be used to facilitate home-stays with families, a cultural translator of sorts to make sure tourists and hosts have fewer misunderstandings. Following the holistic management process, I spoke to people about how increased tourism would affect other parts of their lives for better or worse, and whether or not they were even interested in tourists staying with them. The goal was to find out what they wanted and help them organize a program they could run in the future, once BioRegions was gone.

Also, continuing the potpourri of roles I took on, I became a bit of an electrician for BioRegions. I was in charge of the generator/battery/inverter system that was used to power a laptop, centrifuge, cell phones, and various other American devices. I built a few adaptors for American to Mongolian plugs and made sure that our limited power was efficiently used.

The reality of life in the Darhad was pretty easy to get used to. Being someone who loves the outdoors, I did not mind sleeping in my tent every night or the lack of running water. The harder transition for me was getting used to eating meat and dairy for all meals. There is no such thing as just plain old cold water, most of the time we drank salted milk tea. The fatty parts of

meat are delicacies and usually served to guests, which I was not too thrilled about either. In one case, a family really wanted me to kill their sheep, a high honor. I spoke in my broken Mongolian that culturally I was not used to doing that, so they killed it for me. As an even higher sign of respect, they boiled the innards and served it for dinner. Heading back to America, I was very happy to leave mutton and goat behind.

By the end of the trip, Cliff had become a wise older brother to me. Not only did I learn about holistic management as a highly effective and sensitive development tool, I learned that I could holistically manage my own life for the better. He would be happy to discuss sustainable development and the general question of “how does one help people?” By watching students enact their projects and performing my own I could see the positives and negatives to trying to answer this question. While I still had no definitive answers, I now understand that one must act with unequivocal empathy and humility, much like Cliff, in order to have a positive impact within a community.

Leaving Mongolia at the end of June was much harder than I expected. Having become friends with the few translators and emotionally connected to the beautiful landscape and culture, the idea of a 9-5 job in the States was not enticing. I realized the deep connections I had with the Mongolian herder culture, even though I am coming from a distinctly different background. I hope to continue working in Mongolia; at the very least to deepen my connection with these people I have only begun to understand. Thanks to the Dickey Center, I was able to initiate this relationship and gain a deep contextual understanding of being a foreigner working for the supposed benefit of others. My appreciation for this opportunity goes beyond words. Thank you.