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II. Botanical and Cultural Explorations in the West Darkhad Taiga

Paula DePriest, Museum Conservation Institute

Project Summary

In the past several years the Smithsonian-Mongolian Deer Stone Project's botany team led by **Paula DePriest** and including American botanist **Steve Young** and Smithsonian staff **Deborah Bell**, **Sue Lutz**, and **Gregory McKee**, with Mongolian members

O. Sukbaatar, **J. Oyumaa**, **J. Oyunbileg**, and **Ts. Tsendeehuu**, has explored the territories of the Mongolian Tsaatan, ethnic Tuvan reindeer herders living around the northern Darkhat Valley of Hovsgol Aimag in northern Mongolia. These territories include hunting grounds, plant-gathering places, and traditional, but now abandoned, reindeer seasonal pastures up to 100 km from the Tsaagannur, Ulaan Uul, and Renchinlkhumbé sum centers.



Salag Davaa hunting ovoo in its impressive setting
(photo: P. DePriest)

The most notable destinations west of the Darkhat Valley and the West Taiga reindeer camps have included the extraordinary Salag Davaa hunting ovoo (N51°06.702' E 098°08.961') with over 60 carved images of knives, rifles, and animals dedicated to ceremonially requesting good fortune in hunting. The ovoo, visited with Tsaatan herders in 2005 and 2007, was initially established to ritually facilitate sable hunting after Mongolia's independence in the early 1910s and is maintained still by Dukha and Darkhat hunters traveling through the pass on their

way to the Bussingol Depression. In 2005 the botany team continued on through the Salag Davaa to the Bussingol Depression along the Tuvan border (N51°10.169' E 097°55.169'). The Depression is the spiritual homeland and burial grounds for Soyon clan shamans and, before the re-drawing of the border in the late 1950s, was part of their annual reindeer migration. Now, fifty years after closing of that border and the cessation of herding in the valley, the Bussingol Depression shows ecological succession with increase shrubs and trees and reduced grass steppe and provides an important comparison for studies of Darkhat pasture health.

In 2006, the botany team traveled far north of the Darkhat Valley and the Shishged Gol to abandoned reindeer summer pastures along the Russian border (N51°55.873' E 099°23.482') just beyond the 30-meter Orton Hyyarh waterfall (N51°54.229' E 099°21.685'). These East Taiga camps were reached via the historic Tengis Gol (N51°28.926' E 099°03.007') with its Chinggis Rock and Fence (N51°28.808' E 099°03.050') reported to have been constructed during the Chinggis Khan era. Chinggis Khan (more likely his son Joci) is reported to have visited the confluence of the Tengis and Shishhid Gols to accept the peaceful surrender of the People of the Forest in 1207/08 leaving legendary footprints and a fence of stacked stones. The Tengis Gol is a doubly important site for Mongolians as legend claims that the Mongol clan originated from a blue-grey wolf and a fallow doe along a body of water named 'Tenggis.'

The team, with Tsaatan guide Sanjim and his sons Khalzan, Batmonkh, and Bayanaa of the West Taiga Dukha, conducts plant community reconnaissance and collects representative vascular plants and lichens with special emphasis on those used by the Dukha as pasture for reindeer or as medicinal plants. For example, in 2004 the team traveled along the Jams and Joloc Rivers to find the only reported Mongolian locations for Siberian fir (*Abies sibirica*) that was used as a healing plant by Dukha Shaman Suyan, now deceased, and in 2006 to the Buddhist sacred site Renchinlkhumbe Mountain (N51°32.575' E 099°12.270') to find the traditional Mongolian medicinal plant sawwort – *Saussurea* sp. To date, hundreds of plant collections accumulated during the project have been accessioned in herbaria of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, the Mongolian National Museum and the university at Moron, in addition to the Smithsonian Institution.



Bayanaa collecting specimens for further analysis (photo: P. Depriest 2007)

In addition, the group has visited and documented sacred sites — ovoos and ongons — and conducted ethnographic and ethnobotanical observations of Dukha traditional and religious practices. In 2007, the team visited and documented worship at Buddhist, Darkhat, and Dukha ongons (N51°20.451' E 099°14.693') and visited a Darkhat Shaman's *Asar* field ongon (N51°19.955' E 099°17.675') above the Harmay Valley west of Tsaagannur Soum Center. Most notably, the team observed and documented the guides' ancestor ongons, in their Tuvan language called *Ereen*, displayed inside their ortz (teepee). During the same field season, the botany team attended Tsaagannur Sum's first Tsaatan Festival. The Festival included a traditional horse race, reindeer race, a reindeer polo match, talent competition, and a Darkhat shaman's show. One unique element was the demonstration of traditional birch-bark covering for an ortz prepared by the team's guides. Birch bark was

routinely used on ortz as a summer cover before the 1970s import of canvas, which was overseen by botany team member O. Sukhbaatar.

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III. Smithsonian Festival: *Chinggis Khan: 800 Years of Mongolian Statehood*

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Project Summary

At the request of Mongolian Ambassador Bold, the Smithsonian organized a cultural festival titled *Chinggis Khan: 800 Years of Mongolian Statehood* from 6-8 October 2006. The festival commemorated the anniversary of Mongolia's long history as a nation, founded by Genghis Khan in 1206, and highlighted Mongolian history, arts, science, and performance.

The festival included a symposium at the Woodrow Wilson Center