



# Grasslands of the Mongolian Steppe and Tibetan Plateau

SUSTAINING ANCIENT LANDS AND CULTURES

For millennia, grasslands across five continents have supported biological and cultural diversity dependent on vast open spaces. But today temperate grasslands are the most converted, least protected terrestrial habitat on Earth. Eurasia contains half of the world's remaining temperate grasslands, with the largest intact region remaining in Mongolia.

The rolling Mongolian steppe forms a large crescent around the Gobi Desert, extending across central and eastern Mongolia into northwest China and the North China Plain. Along the northern edge of these rich grasslands, a hilly mosaic of savanna, rivers and wetlands merges into the taiga forests of Siberia. The steppe is home to a large and healthy herd of white-tailed gazelle, a truly nomadic species follows no fixed migratory route and needs an extremely large landscape to survive. The region is also home to steppe eagles, cranes, wolves, elk and one of the most vibrant nomadic herding societies in existence.

While much of China suffers from widespread environmental degradation, the Tibetan Plateau remains a refuge for the most pristine mountain grassland in Eurasia. Nomadic groups have been moving around this area for thousands of years, following the natural rhythm of the seasons and availability of grassland to raise their livestock.

This is the highest and largest plateau in the world, covering about 25 percent of China's land area and boasting one of the most ecologically diverse alpine communities on Earth. The snows that fall here form the headwaters for all the major rivers of East Asia. It is home for herds of wild antelope and blue sheep,



Nomadic herders of Mongolia with horses and domestic (two-humped) Bactrian camels (*Camelus bactrianus*) cross the wide Mongolian grasslands. ©Greg Gamble/TNC

the endangered wild yak and elusive snow leopard, and an astonishing array of raptors.

The Mongolia steppe and Tibetan Plateau present two of the last and best opportunities on Earth to protect grasslands and savanna at a scale large enough to support the wildlife and the nomadic people who live there.

## ANCIENT LANDSCAPES, MODERN PRESSURES

Once isolated, the steppe in eastern Mongolia faces mounting pressures as the country seeks to develop its mineral resources and connect to East Asian

markets. Proposed and expanding mines, oil fields, roads, railroads and agriculture, coupled with overgrazing and overhunting, threaten the long-term prospects of this landscape. Across the border in China's Inner Mongolia region, significant change has already created the need for steppe restoration. Less than six percent of the Mongolian steppe is currently in protected status and of that, less than two percent has adequate enforcement and management.

On the Tibetan Plateau, now more accessible by road and rail, a growing population and increasing numbers of cattle and sheep are putting pressure on

the fragile alpine landscape and competing with wildlife. The plateau contains one of the world's largest protected areas, the Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve. However, due to inadequate management of the reserve, poaching and inappropriate use of land threaten this region's unique vegetation and wildlife. Both regions are experiencing drying of rivers, wetlands and the grasslands that provide sustenance to native animals and a livelihood for traditional herders.

### CONSERVATION THAT BENEFITS NATURE AND PEOPLE

Over the next eight years, The Nature Conservancy will bring decades of conservation experience and in-depth grassland management expertise to the Mongolian steppe and the Tibetan Plateau, while at the same time learning from those already living and working in these regions. We will combine our science-based methods with a "people-focused" approach that seeks to balance the interests of conservation with sustainable economic development and social welfare.

In eastern Mongolia, where the heart of the Mongolia-Manchurian Grassland and the Daurian Forest steppe is intact and as

yet undeveloped, we are launching a process to create a sustainable development plan for 69 million acres. This entails improving management of the 4.64 million acres of existing grassland protected areas in Mongolia, expanding the network of national and local protected areas, and designing and implementing strategies for protecting and managing the intact landscape and biodiversity in between. We will collaborate with government ministries; mining, business, religious, civil society and conservation leaders and local stakeholders to balance the interests of conservation and local herders with responsible mining, oil and infrastructure development. Across the border in China, at the request of the Hulunbeir provincial government, we are assessing ecosystem restoration opportunities and trans-boundary conservation strategies.

Initially on the Tibetan Plateau, the Conservancy will focus on improving management of the 37.6 million-acre Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve in China's Qinghai Province, the highest and most extensive protected area of wetlands in the world. With diverse stakeholders including the nature reserve, railway and highway authorities, local governments and communities, the Conservancy will help coordinate grassland, wildlife and

wetland management to promote recovery of wetlands, reduce poaching and develop a conservation model that can be replicated across the entire plateau.

### A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR THE WORLD'S LARGEST TEMPERATE GRASSLANDS

Grasslands are among the world's most imperiled major habitats, and they are essential for sustaining life on planet Earth. The grasslands of Mongolia and China present a unique opportunity to conserve vast, unspoiled landscapes that support the region's ancient nomadic cultures and extraordinary wildlife.

Long-term sustainable conservation requires that we protect large-scale ecological processes while recognizing regional economic imperatives and the needs of local people. The Nature Conservancy can play an essential role in creating that natural legacy alongside the communities that depend upon these lands. We need to act now or risk losing irreplaceable natural treasures and a rich cultural heritage



The Przewalski's horse or Takhi is the national symbol of Mongolia. It is the only remaining genuinely wild species of horse in the world. ©Wayne Ostlie

## CAMPAIGN *for a* SUSTAINABLE PLANET

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Protecting nature. Preserving life.™

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