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In the Mongolian taiga, or snow forest, a few kilometres from the Russian border, a group of 250 reindeer herders preserve their traditions with care. They dwell, as their ancestors did, in the forest, where they live by hunting, gathering and drinking the milk of their animals. But the creation of a protected area to preserve the wild environment may threaten their survival.

Two men, one battle

Ganbat and Tumursukh were born in the same village in the middle of the taiga, about 50 years ago. Reaching the snow-covered forest region in the country's north-east takes two days by car from the nearest city, Murun, and then a journey by horse or reindeer - including passage across Khovsgol lake - all without encountering a soul beyond the odd elk or lynx. The two men, now fathers and respected elders in their communities, have dedicated their lives to this vast expanse of boreal forest. Their eyes light up when they speak of it.

"I'm proud to have been born in this region," says Tumursukh. "My father took me to the forest as a child, and I learned to know it and to love it. When I had the opportunity to leave and study in Ulaanbaatar [Mongolia's capital], I wanted to come back. I waited several years before realising my dream: being named manager of the regional protection of Khovsgol by the ministry of the environment.

"In 1987, I was able to establish the first protected area in the region and save a part of it from mining exploitation. In the 80s, industrial outfits began to come into the region. The companies mined the mountain [Urandush in the Jankal range] for phosphorus. We fight to preserve our environment against these threats. The taiga is precious and fragile. It's home to rare and endangered species of flower, to snow leopards, elk, ibex ... The government has understood and has begun to preserve it."

Sitting beside his wife in his *ortz*, a felt-lined tipi made of wood, Ganbat says: "The taiga is our life. We don't know how to do anything other than live with it. We have always taken care of nature - this is what our ancestors taught us. Our role is to testify to our love and respect for the taiga. We've taken care of our reindeer since before Mongolia existed, they are our pride."

The taiga is fragile. Ganbat and Tumursukh are aware of this and fight daily for its survival. Despite this common cause, the two men have different backgrounds and their approach to conserving the taiga is bringing them into conflict.

Tumursukh, who is an ethnic Mongol, is responsible for the natural reserves of the region and is a fervent opponent of mining in the area. Mining has driven Mongolia's recent economic boom, which has propelled the country to middle-income status. But mining the rich subsoil has also caused environmental degradation and ravaged the land.

Ganbat is a Dukha, one of the smallest ethnic groups in the world, comprising about 250 people. A reindeer herder, hunter and protector of the traditions of his people, he watches over his community and their traditional lands. He is the oldest man in the Dukha camp, a respected sage to whom the group listens.

Originally from Russia, the Dukha (who are also called Tsataan in Mongolian) are closer in traditions and way of life to Laplanders, the reindeer herders of the Arctic, than to Mongols of the steppe, as they are nomadic.

These Dukha nomads move their *ortz* according to the migrations of the reindeer in these wild mountains - the only environment favourable to their animals. They don't grow crops, or raise animals other than reindeer. They don't eat the reindeer, using them only for their milk and for transhumance.

It was only after the second world war that the Dukha established themselves definitively in Mongolia. "Our fathers were accustomed to migrating where they wanted to within the taiga," says Buyantogtoh, Ganbat's sister and the group's doyen. "We knew no frontiers, and went wherever our reindeer had sufficient pasture. Then the war broke out, and the Russian soldiers wanted to recruit our men to go and fight far away from us. We fled to the south. Then they closed the borders, and we stayed on this side, in Mongolia."

Initially, relations with the Mongolian state were positive, according to the Dukha, who have rarely mixed with the people living in the valleys. Known for their vast knowledge of the taiga and their capability as hunters, they were hired as "state hunters" by Mongolia's communist government.

Oltsen is one of the best hunters in the group, and is capable of confronting the bears that menace the reindeer herds. "My father was a state hunter," says Oltsen, proudly. "He hunted, would go down to the villages to bring the meat, and would return with vegetables and flour. This became more difficult after the fall of the communist government: he lost his job. But we have pursued commercial activity, selling furs and meat when we can. Tourists came as well, and we began to do crafts. They liked that."

The situation has worsened: without a place in society, regarded as merely reindeer herders, the Dukha have become marginalised. In 2011, their lives changed radically.

"People came and told us that they had studied the taiga for 10 years," says Oltsen, bitterly. "We had never seen them. They explained to us that this territory had become a national reserve and that new laws had been put in place. They had decided that we couldn't hunt any more and that only three areas were authorised for the pasturing of our reindeer. We were no longer permitted to take them beyond the Tengis river and the Gugned Valley. But how would we live if we weren't able to hunt any more?"

"To make sure that we didn't hunt, they forbade us from bringing our dogs to guard the reindeer. But there are wolves here. Our herds were decimated. We don't have anything but our reindeer. It's our right to take care of them."

Under Mongolian law, hunting is forbidden in the Tengis Shishged national reserve, as are fishing and chopping wood, and only limited migrations are allowed, in order to preserve biodiversity. Recently, rangers have been deployed to protect the area. It is easy to imagine how relations between these rangers - mainly young, urban newcomers - and the Dukha, who have dwelled in these lands for hundreds of years, rapidly became strained.

“They don’t let us live any more. They track us, breathing down our necks to make sure our sons aren’t hunting,” says Buyantogtoh, who cooks bread in his *ortz*, while the wind blows at -20°C outside. “We need to hunt to live, to cut wood to warm ourselves, to access pasture to feed our reindeer. If these things are outlawed, we’re no longer free.”

“Do they want to make us Mongols of the steppe,” asks Oltsen. “I don’t know how to do anything other than live here. But I know the taiga better than anyone. I know every corner of this mountain. I know the animals and we show them respect, just as our fathers taught us. We communicate with nature. If I go hunting and don’t see many animals, it means that nature isn’t ready to give them to me and I go home. We lose our culture if we can’t hunt any longer or can’t keep our reindeer. We’re scared.”

A few months ago, five Dukha hunters were arrested for poaching while searching for food. Ganbat’s son was among them.

“They were taken to the police station in town. But we don’t have vehicles, or the means to let them stay in town,” Ganbat says. “We’re all afraid. We don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Police headquarters and the courts are in far-off Murun. The young men have returned to the Dukha camp but (risk up to five years in prison, and fines of up to £7,500, for breaking the laws of the reserve.

The manager of the Murun police investigations department said: “The reserve has brought a complaint against them for poaching. They were caught red-handed hunting. Here in Mongolia, the law applies to everybody. The Dukha are not above Mongolian law.”

“The Dukha don’t understand our work,” laments Tumursukh. “Our goal is to preserve the taiga and to create strictly protected areas in which humans will not be able to destroy nature. These resources must be preserved for future generations. If we don’t create this reserve, these resources will disappear. We can’t let that happen.”

He has just returned from a trip to the US, where he has raised funding from private donors and signed an official partnership with Yosemite national park, known for being the first protected park in history - and for having been created on the territories of indigenous people, who have all but disappeared.

US donors are raising funds to buy motorbikes for Tengis Shishged park rangers, making it easier for them to cover the region more efficiently. Their website, Rally for Rangers, says: “The Tengis Shishged park is one of the rare places in the world where this ancient pastoral religious form survives.” Not for long, if the Dukha are no longer allowed to carry on their traditional activities.

The Dukha are sceptical about the initiative: “They [rangers] spend their time riding up and down the mountain, frightening the animals. And they follow us even more aggressively now,” says Ganbat. “We want our message to be heard. We want to remain in our home and live freely.”

In 2014, the Mongolian government heard the pleas of the Dukha and a salary of £50 a person is now provided each month. It is meagre compensation for being deprived of food from hunting, wood to build their homes, pasture for their reindeer and the sacred sites where they honour their ancestors.

For the Dukha, the message is clear. “They don’t want us to hunt, they want to make us sedentary, live close to the villages, so that we buy their food,” says Buyantogtoh. The Dukha

aren't complaining about their new source of revenue, which allows them access to resources and luxuries they wouldn't otherwise have, yet they remain defiant when it comes to their tradition of preserving, in their own way, the land on which they live.

"I'm not afraid of them, even with their motorbikes and their park," Buyantogtoh says. "With or without them, we will conserve our forest."

"Why don't they come and talk with us?" asks Ganbat. "We would tell them what to protect and where the animals are. But also which lands we need for our reindeer. Why couldn't we work together?"

Worldwide, that question echoes in many indigenous communities. The Dukha aren't alone: there are about 370 million indigenous people, spread across five continents. They live in regions threatened by exploitation, conservation of which nonetheless sometimes comes at the expense of those who reside within them.

In 2014, Mongolia passed a law to create protected cultural areas, which would be managed by local communities and help to preserve their cultural heritage. Oyungerel Tsedevdamba, a former Mongolian MP and minister of culture who campaigned for the new law, says: "Mongolia must preserve its cultural heritage and help people who want to maintain their lifestyles. In a protected cultural area, hunting would be allowed, for example - even if regulated - as a cultural practice."

On paper, this appears promising. But Oyungerel, who was a prominent spokeswoman for Dukha rights, is no longer in government. The law is legally in force but has not yet been implemented, and the Dukha aren't even aware of it. Challenges lie ahead for this tiny group of nomads, trying to survive in their corner of taiga.

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