

Gobi Futures: Navigating and Anticipating Change in a Transforming Desert

July 27-August 14, 2020



Course Instructors:

Dr. Lauren Bonilla, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, lbonilla@mit.edu

G. Munkherdene, Mongolian University of Science and Technology, gmunkherdene@gmail.com

Course Description:

This field course offers an opportunity for participants to learn about transformations unfolding in the Gobi Desert. Historically the cultural and economic crossroads of Asia, the Gobi has recently emerged as the epicenter of Mongolia's mining boom. Within a short period, new mining, infrastructure, and trade activities have generated unprecedented social and environmental changes in the region. This has given rise to excitement about the economic and development potential of the Gobi and its role in Mongolia's national growth, as well as concerns about the future of the Gobi as a viable place to live and herd livestock, as a geopolitically strategic border zone between China and Mongolia, and as an ecologically vital arid landscape sensitive to climate and land use changes.

Participants will travel to Omnogobi ("South Gobi") Province and meet with different groups of people – such as herders, small business owners, government officials, and mining company representatives – to examine how they are variously navigating processes of change and anticipating and planning for different kinds of futures. Excursions to the Tavan Tolgoi coal mine complex, the Gurvan Saikhan National Park, herding areas, and the site of a controversial railway project will illuminate divergent and sometimes contentious perspectives regarding the ways in which the Gobi should be developed and protected. Students will grapple with these differences and consider how they shape resource use and governance practices, planning and design initiatives, social and livelihood dynamics, and broader political concerns.

During the course students will learn ethnographic research methods and scenario building techniques to explore possible futures for the Gobi in light of contemporary factors and forces

such as climate change, groundwater depletion, economic booms and busts, herder-mine conflicts, and increased connectivity with China due to the Belt and Road Initiative. An anticipated outcome of this course is the creation of a “Scenarios for Gobi Futures” multimedia report that can be used as a resource for participants, policymakers, and other stakeholders interested in the future of the Mongolian Gobi.

This is an interdisciplinary course that draws insights from the fields of anthropology, geography, development studies, and other disciplines. It aims to instill in students an awareness of the social and environmental dimensions of resource extraction in arid landscapes and an understanding of the varied meanings and experiences of development. Participation does not require previous knowledge of Mongolia.

Anticipated Course Activities:

- July 27 - 30 Program and Course Orientation in Ulaanbaatar. Gain an introduction to Mongolian culture and language, history, and contemporary issues, along with an introduction to the course and instructional methods. Site visits and guest speakers with local officials.
- July 31 Drive from Ulaanbaatar to Mandalgobi. Overnight in hotel.
- Aug 1 Drive to Dalanzadgad, the administrative capital of Omnogobi province. Explore the city’s market, public park, and new construction projects. Overnight in ger camp.
- Aug 2 Drive to the Gurvan Saikhan National Park. Overnight in tents.
- Aug 3 Meet with local herders in the Gurvan Saikhan National Park to discuss water conservation, mining, tourism, and the future of herding. Overnight in tents.
- Aug 4 Return to Dalanzadgad. Meet with local officials and small business owners to discuss trade, infrastructure, and socio-economic issues. Overnight in ger camp.
- Aug 5 Drive to Tsogttsetsii, the site of the Tavan Tolgoi coal complex. Overnight in hotel.
- Aug 6 - 7 Visit the coal mine and learn about community engagement, water management, dust suppression, and mine worker livelihoods. Walk around Tsogttsetsii city center and the “Tsetsii Town” living complex for mine workers. Overnight in hotel.
- Aug 8 Drive along the coal export road and visit the site of planned railway infrastructure to China. Meet with local residents. Overnight in hotel.
- Aug 9 Meet with local residents and visit a farming operation growing native seabuckthorn shrubs.
- Aug 10 Return drive to Ulaanbaatar.
- Aug 11 - 13 Meetings with Gobi-focused policy makers. Group discussions and development of “Scenarios for Gobi Futures” multimedia project.
- Aug 14 ACMS Field School wrap up conference in Ulaanbaatar. Meet with participants of other field school courses to discuss their explorations and learning. Engage in a discussion of common themes and experiences. Discuss next steps for personal development in career and travel in Mongolia and beyond.

About the Instructors:



Dr. Lauren Bonilla is a researcher and educator based in the Department of Anthropology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Over the last 15 years, she has traveled extensively throughout Mongolia as part of various research projects. Her most recent research traces the development of Mongolia's mining economy, focusing on resource ownership, environmental governance, infrastructure development, and wealth redistribution. Lauren has conducted long-term fieldwork in the Gobi region, specifically around the Tavan Tolgoi coal deposit. She received her BA in Geography and Anthropology from Macalester College, a PhD in Geography from Clark University, and was a postdoctoral researcher on the "Emerging Subjects" project at University College London focused on the Mongolian economy.



Munkherdene Gantulga is lecturer in the Department of Humanities at the Mongolian University of Science and Technology. Originally from Bayankhongor province, he received a BA in the History of Mongolia and Ethnology and an MA in Social Anthropology from the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the National University of Mongolia. Munkherdene is currently completing an MA in Development Studies at the University of Melbourne. His research interests focus on ninja (artisanal) miners, nationalism, issues of cultural heritage, globalization, development, and mining in Mongolia.