

Course Title: Mongolian Buddhism, Nature, and Conservation

June 20 – July 7, 2022



Course Instructors:

Dr. Betsy Gaines Quammen, Environmental historian specializing in landscape and culture.

bquammen@gmail.com

Rebecca Watters, Wildlife biologist and writer, rebecca@nrccooperative.org

In addition to presentations by the course instructor, the tour will be complemented by visits and lessons from Buddhist experts, including a high lama at the Gandan Monastery, Da Lama Kh. Byambajav.

Course Overview:

This course will focus on the intersection between Mongolian Buddhism, Shamanism, nature ethics and environmental conservation. We'll cover the history and philosophy of Mongolian Buddhism, tracing its flow from the Silk Route to the twentieth century religious purges to its modern-day renaissance. The class will explore Buddhist influences upon current directions in ecological thought and practice in Mongolia (with ramifications elsewhere), especially in confronting wildlife poaching, climate change and sustainability. The goal of the course is to familiarize participants with Mongolian Buddhism's unique narrative as well as its role in current ecological crises.

We will visit Mongolia's oldest monasteries, Erdene Zuu (1585) and Amarbaysgalant (1726), and discuss the course of Buddhism as it moved from Tibet and became embedded in Mongolia. We will also look at a more modern monastery, Chojjin Lam (1904), that survived the religious purges of the 1930s and was then used by political leaders as an example of corruption within Buddhist leadership at the turn of the twentieth century. We'll head to the gorgeous Eg-Uur Valley, where we are spending most of the course, examining Buddhism, its teachings, and its role in modern conservation practices. Here we will hear about the preservation of the taimen

(*Hucho taimen*), a magnificently large and endangered species of salmonid (salmon family) fish. The taimen, already lost from most of its range in north Asia, holds a special place in the Buddhist beliefs of the Eg-Uur valley, and its story vividly exemplifies the Buddhist vision of nature and its spiritual dimensions. Our days here will be full—meeting with local nomadic families, learning about local beliefs and practices, and visiting sacred sights. We'll stay in cozy gers (yurts) beside the wide and lovely Uur River.

The Dayan Derkh Monastery, also on the bank of the Uur, and recently rebuilt after it was destroyed during the communist era, is the perfect focal point for our work on Buddhism and nature. Its restoration came about through a collaboration between the local monk community, scientists, and international anglers, who together worked to protect the regional watershed and its resident taimen population. Rebuilding the Dayan Derkh Monastery allowed local people to restore their place of religious practice and became a symbol in Buddhist conservation practice. Monks from Gandan Monastery helped in the effort by revealing a sutra (Buddhist scripture) that read the “death of one taimen equals the souls of 999 people suffering.” This made an impression on the local community, and poaching decreased considerably.

Dayan Derkh Monastery is named after a “wicked” shaman who, according to legend, converted to Buddhism and became a hero. This legend demonstrates anti-Shamanic propaganda spread during the long-ago Buddhist missionary campaigns, as well as a regional syncretism between Buddhism and Shamanism that is so common in the province. Our camp site is surrounded by Buddhist and Shamanic sacred sites, which we will visit by horseback and boat. The hiking in the area is also exquisite.

We will also discuss the role of Buddhism in conservation issues on a global scale and learn about the activism campaigns tied to “engaged Buddhism.” This trip will give participants the opportunity to experience some of the best things Mongolia has to offer: the beautiful countryside, Buddhist culture, nomadic pastoralism and great adventure.

Anticipated Itinerary:

- Day 1-4: Course and Program orientation in Ulaanbaatar. Classes at Gandan Monastery and a visit to Choijin Lam. Participants will be introduced to Mongolian culture, language, history and contemporary issues. Students will meet their instructors and classmates, and begin to engage in course related discussions and explorations such as classes at Gandan Monastery and a visit to Choijin Lam Monastery. Discussions with experts from the Mongolian government, local NGOs and religious organizations.
- Day 5-7: Drive to Erdenet. Tour Amarbayasgalant Monastery. This is one of the most significant sites in Mongolia. Night at a ger camp.
- Day 8: Drive to Erdenebulgan. Arrive at Upper Uur Camp.
- Day 9-13: Classes in Mongolian Buddhism and Central Asian History. We'll visit Dayan Derkh Monastery and learn about their unique conservation work; meet with local nomadic families; and visit Javzandulam, a local shaman woman. We'll ride on horseback to a sacred cave and explore the unmatched beauty of the Eg-Uur River valley.
- Day 14-16: Drive to Karakorum/Kharkhorin. Tour of the Erdene Zuu Monastery to meet with local officials from the monastery and community to discuss the intersection of nature and religion.
- Day 17: Return to Ulaanbaatar.
- Day 18: Conclusion in Ulaanbaatar

About the Instructors:



Betsy Gaines Quammen is an environmental historian. She received a PhD from Montana State University, where she focused on how religious beliefs influence perspectives on landscape. She has studied Asian religions and practices Buddhism. Wildlife protection is her passion, having over the years helped establish conservation projects in Mongolia, Bhutan and throughout the American West. She has a BA in English from Colorado College and a MS in Environmental Studies from University of Montana.



Rebecca Watters is a wildlife biologist and writer based in Bozeman, Montana. She is the executive director of the Wolverine Foundation. She spent two years in Mongolia doing environmental work as a Peace Corps volunteer, and started the Mongolian Wolverine Project in 2009 to assess and monitor climate-sensitive mountain wildlife in Mongolia. The Mongolian Wolverine Project has expanded beyond wolverines and works with three large protected areas in northern Mongolia to monitor wildlife and to build conservation capacity. She has a BA in anthropology from St. Lawrence University and a MEd from the Yale School of the Environment.