



This gracious looking White-naped crane can be a symbol of wetland conservation in Mongolia, and perhaps in East Asia as well. They are highly dependent on healthy wetland habitats across its breeding and wintering range. For the past 10 years, we have been working very hard to ensure that the species continue thriving in its native lands across northeast Mongolia.

It is such a joy to see them coming back in spring and start raising their chicks during short summer season in Mongolia, and then returning to the south for winter.

A historic day for cranes and people in Khurkh and Khuiten River Valleys

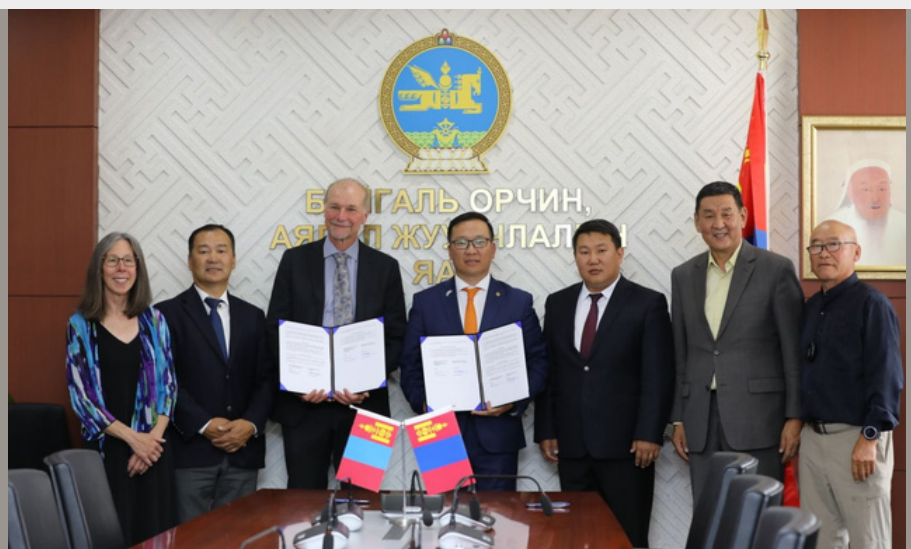
The Government of Mongolia designated the Khurkh-Khuiten River Valleys (KKRV) as a National Nature Reserve in May 2020. The Khurkh-Khuiten Nature Reserve, which is a 193,590-hectare area, supports a mix of grasslands, croplands, forests, and wetlands that provide a haven for the world's most important breeding concentration of Vulnerable White-naped Cranes. Up to 70 pairs of White-naped cranes nest in the area.



In October 2022, the Department of the Special Protected Areas Management at the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, the Governor of Khentii Province, together with leaders of the four counties surrounding the nature reserve signed an agreement with the Wildlife Science and Conservation Center of Mongolia to coordinate management of the reserve. This was a landmark deal to transfer the management responsibility of the newly established Khurkh and Khuiten Nature Reserve (KKNR) to our team. We will be collaborating with local herders and authorities to manage this important reserve with rich habitats, cranes and other wildlife.

ICF will continue supporting crane conservation in Mongolia

In early August 2022, ICF's the President Dr. Rich Beilfuss, Vice president of the international – Asia Dr. Spike Millington, and Director of conservation networking Dr. Claire Mirande met with Minister Mr. Bat-Erdene Bat-Ulzii and State Secretary Mr. Battulga Erkhembayar of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of Mongolia. Parties discussed about ICF's contribution to crane and wetland conservation and capacity building in Mongolia since 1990s and agreed to continue the collaboration focusing on conservation and management of key sites, carry out long term studies, and capacity building.



Khurkh-Khuiten Nature Reserve

In mid 1980s, Mongolian researchers Dr. Bold Ayurzana and Tseveenmyadag Natsagdorj discovered an area with huge ornithological importance in northeast Mongolia. Soon the importance of its conservation significance has become evident as the site supports one of the largest crane and waterbird congregations in the northeast. Since then the KKRK has become a well-known place internationally receiving various key designations such as North East Asian Crane Network Site (1999), Ramsar Site (2004), Important Bird Area (2007), and East Asian Flyway Site (2011).

In general, KKNR supports over 70 nesting pairs of WNCs, which is the highest nesting density of this globally threatened species in Asia. It's also an important breeding area for Demoiselle and Eurasian crane and the critically endangered Eastern subspecies of the Great Bustard, and a summering area for non-breeding Siberian and Hooded cranes.. Mongolian researchers call it the crane capital of Mongolia.



The White-naped Crane is a threatened species (IUCN Vulnerable) with about 7,000-7,800 individuals remaining in the wild globally (Mirande et al 2019). They are only found in East Asia, and primarily nest in wetlands of the grassland steppe and forest steppe zones in northeast Mongolia, southeastern Russia, and northeast China. Most White-naped Cranes in Mongolia and western parts of the breeding range winter at Poyang Lake in East China. This western flyway population has declined by a startling 50% to 1,500 birds in the last decade (Li et al 2012). Thus protecting key breeding sites such as Khurkh and Khuiten River Valleys will be critical for the survival of the western population.



USFS provides social science training

We have organized another round of the “Social science for conservation and natural resources management” training sessions in August 2022 in collaboration with the USFS, ICF, and MET. This session was a follow-up to another training that was organized in March 2022. This time we focused more on data analysis and reporting techniques. In total 42 people from six different agencies and organizations participated. Over 48% of the participants were specialists from special protected areas, 8% from provincial environmental protection agencies, 24% from the water basin management authorities, 12% from MET departments, 4% from universities, and 4% from WSCC.

We are grateful for USFS specialists, Emily Huff and Kristin Floress, who presented two highly motivational talks during this training, and Marija Spirovska Kono for her wonderful support to make this training happen.

Crane and bird watching tourisms through Mongolian Birding Trails Program

Community-based ecotourism has become a popular alternative for biodiversity conservation in many countries. It is based on the principle that biodiversity must pay for itself by generating economic benefits for local people. WSCC initiated a Mongolia Birding Trails (MBT) program, which is a community-based ecotourism project that employs birdwatching tourism. The program is sponsored by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation with input and co-sponsorship from ICF.

Birdwatching tourism generates certain income for local communities and finances the operations and management of special protected areas and other key biodiversity areas. KKRK was selected as one of the trial sites of the MBT program. We hope that the community groups in the reserve will be the main beneficiaries and the local service providers, ensuring a successful and sustainable partnership with the new reserve administration.



Promoting new protection status of KKR

In October 2021, we organized a meeting with local stakeholders to promote new protection status of KKR, identify conservation and management needs, and discuss options for collaborative actions. Representatives from Binder, Batshireet, Omnodelger, and Bayan-Adraga counties, Khurkh town, and Khentii province delegation arrived to the meeting. It was a very productive meeting, because we gave detailed presentations about the WNC project, birding tourism possibilities, and needs for collaborative management of KKR.



Every local participant who attended the meeting were newly appointed government workers whom we will be communicating regularly in the future. In addition, The Nature Conservancy team presented their plan to establish several community groups in Khentii province. We will be working close with them to establish three community groups in KKR.



Flyway to the Korean peninsula

Since 2013, we have been studying the migration and flyways of White-naped cranes in many parts of Mongolia. Until this year, all GPS tracked White-naped cranes went to Poyang Lake for winter. In July 2022, a joint team from Mongolia and South Korea GPS marked one adult and one juvenile cranes in eastern Mongolia. Both birds took different flight paths and arrived in DMZ area in South Korea in late October. Now the adult is staying in Cheorwon and the young crane is in Paju, South Korea. They might go to Izumi Crane Park in Japan. Recently Izumi Crane Park is experiencing worst cases of high path avian influenza. Many cranes including White-naped cranes have been died since November 2022. It is truly a worrying development. Recently East Asian crane experts met via an online meeting to discuss about situation and awareness level in case of disease outbreaks in other areas.



Herder household survey highlights where we need to focus our activities

In June 2022, our team surveyed 258 herder families living on the territory of the new nature reserve. The main goal of this survey was to collect socioeconomic baseline data of the local communities. We conducted a questionnaire survey that was designed to capture basic social and economic data at the household level. Also, we wanted to understand local people's perception of cranes, wetlands, and the designation of the new reserve.

The preliminary result shows that 68% of the respondents did not know about the creation of the new nature reserve. Although most of those people lived in remote places and often away from wetlands; it indicates that we need to do more work on promoting the nature reserve in the area. Also, the survey reveals that inadequate income sources might be the main reason for poverty.

There is about 144,600 livestock inside the KKNR. It is permitted to have grazing animals inside the Nature Reserves by the Mongolian Law on Land. But the law does not allow people to have non-traditional animal farming inside the nature reserves. That means we need to develop a model that ensures the co-existence of traditional livestock husbandry and cranes.

Data from this survey will be used for the KKNR Management Plan that is being developed. Current socioeconomic data is an important part of the management plan because it will be used to measure the success of management actions in the future.



Adult WNC with color band and GPS transmitter was spotted in Cheorwon on 10 Dec 2022, South Korea



Bringing herder women closer to crane conservation

My name is Tuvshée and I coordinate the Crane Enterprise Program (CEP). CEP is an initiative with the goal to engage herder families in crane conservation by working with herder women and teaching them to make beautiful handcrafts using sheep wool.

We are constantly looking for ideas to engage herders in crane and wetland conservation. Studies show that herder women contribute more to family income through milk and cashmere production and have more input into many decisions within the family. Therefore, they could be the greatest contributors to crane conservation.

Through our CEP, we help them to learn and eventually make a variety of sheep wool handcraft products and sell them in through gift shops in big cities. The income generated will help these local families. At the same time, we are building a local community that embraces crane conservation in the area.

We were very proud of our community group members when ICF directors visited last summer. Our herder ladies had a wonderful opportunity to show them how we turn raw sheep wool into beautiful souvenirs, pet toys, Christmas tree decorations, beer mats, and warm slippers.

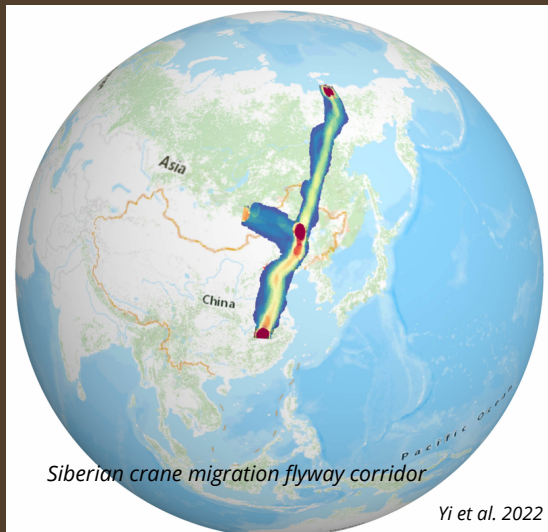
Our near future goal is to expand the CEP activities into rest of the nature reserve, engage more families that share wetlands with cranes, increase product quality and quantity, and find more market to sell them. If you would like to support our program, please contact us.



Yes, Siberian cranes love this area!

We captured and marked our first Siberian crane in July 2015. At that time, we thought we were simply lucky to catch one individual happen to be there at that moment. But apparently we were wrong. Because every year, we are recording this species on a regular basis in KKR. For the past 5-10 years, Siberian cranes are arriving on record number in KKR during summer time. Last summer, there were totally 29 Siberian cranes in KKR.

Also we have managed to capture six more individuals and deploy GPS transmitters since then. In 2022, we, together with the colleagues from China and Russia, published our first paper about identifying gaps in knowledge and conservation of this species based on GPS tracking data from Mongolia.



The tracking data based on GPS tagged cranes showed that 77% of the breeding areas in Russia, 55% of the staging areas in China and Russia, 99% of the non-breeding summering area in Mongolia, and 50% of the wintering areas in Poyang Lake in China lay outside the current protected area network. It clearly suggested that the current protected areas network along the Siberian crane flyway is inadequate for this species.



Dr. Tseveen is standing next to a recently color banded adult Siberian crane before its release. Note that a GPS transmitter is visible on the back of crane.

"It has become quite common to see Siberian cranes during the summer period in KKR."



Our wetland ecology team's primary goal is to demonstrate how wetland conservation management and local herders and farmers can co-exist.

Because Mongolia does not have adequate water usage regulations, many critical wetland habitats are threatened by unsustainable usage and pollution; therefore, our work on wetland research, preservation, and management is more important than ever. Our work on wetland conservation as a crane habitat has been an example of similar habitats in Mongolia. Now we are working with authorities on improving Ramsar site management and protection using our model in KKR. We hope this will protect more critical crane habitats in Mongolia.



Wetland ecology team empowers the local knowledge on wetlands

It used to be uneasy to explain to the local communities about how loss and changing wetlands can impact not only cranes but also their livelihood by reducing the amount of water available to livestock and crops. Thanks to the hard work of our ecology team led by Vandandorj Sumiya, who is the Leiden Conservation Fellow. Things are much easier now because we have much needed baseline information on wetland status and hydrology dynamics of major lakes and rivers in KKR. When you show local people the data and graphs produced from their local environment, they absorb it quicker and easier because we are telling them data from an area that they are already familiar with.

Data from the wetland ecology team was the one fundamental pieces of information to convince the authorities and local community about the importance of protecting the KKR.

Building on our experiences, we are constantly improving our work on wetlands, permafrost, and peatlands. Also, we have started sharing our experiences with people working in similar areas. During the past several years, we have organized training workshops for wetland site managers, Eco club members, and protected area specialists in eastern Mongolia. Such training programs provide us nice opportunity to expand our outreach and broaden our conservation footprint.

This newsletter is produced from the project "Strengthening Conservation of Priority Crane Habitats in East Asia through Research, International Collaboration, and Community Engagement".
Main collaborating partners are:



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