Part 2: Research station of the University of Goettingen in Mongolia

Mongolia, the research station Kohnin Nuga and my work

Mongolia

Bordering Russia in the North and surrounded by China in the South, East and West, the beautiful and diverse Mongolia belongs to the so-called landlocked countries of the world. A typical feature of these countries is their continental climate with harsh winters and rather hot summers, very well exemplified in Mongolia, where average temperatures easily drop down to - 31° C (max.: - 53° C) in January, but rise to + 29° C during summer (max.: + 43° C)[3]. Due to an average of 257 days of sunshine annually (well above the amount received by other countries at the same latitude)[4], Mongolia is also known as the "*Land of the Blue Sky*". It receives a rather low amount of precipitation, averaging 200 – 220 mm per year, ranging from less than 50 mm in the South (desert region) to 400 mm in limited areas in the North[1]. Most of this precipitation occurs between the middle of June and the end of August.

Mongolia has only about 2.6 million inhabitants[5] and is thus one of the countries with the lowest population density in the world (1,7 inhabitants per km²)[6]. Be it desert, semi-desert, steppe, forest-steppe, taiga, alpine ecosystems, the almost 3.500 fresh and saltwater lakes or the countries 200 glaciers[7] – in one way or the other, all of these natural systems profit from the low population numbers. It is the absence of people, combined with an only rudimentary infrastructure, which kept large tracts of the land almost untouched, thus preserving huge areas of true wilderness. In the South, for instance, the migration of the Mongolian gazelle (*Procapra gutturosa*) across largely unfragmented landscapes still occurs on a scale only equalled by the great migrations of herbivores in parts the African savannah[5].

Currently, roundabout half of the Mongolian population continues to follow the traditional culture of semi-nomadic herding, typically keeping sheep, goats, horses, camels and cattle (cows and yaks)[8]. They are living in tent-like houses (*Gers*), moving from grazing site to grazing site, taking advantage of a variety of different habitats according to the demands of their animals throughout the year. While the low population numbers are beneficial to the

[3] ERDENETUYA, M., KHUDULMUR, S. (1997). *Land cover change and pasture estimation of Mongolia from space*. Ministry for Nature and Environment of Mongolia
[4] Wikipedia (2007). URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mongolia. Retrieved: 06.05.2007
[5] National Statistical Office of Mongolia (2006). *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*, Dec. 2006. Ulaanbaatar
[6] CIA Factbook (2007). URL: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mg.html. Retrieved: 06.05.2007
[7] LUSHEKINA, A. (2002). *Biodiversity Briefings from Northern Eurasia*, Vol. 2, Issue 1. Special Supplement to Russian Conservation News. URL: http://www.russianconservation.org/BiodivBrief-Mongolia.pdf. Retrieved: 08.05.2007
[8] National Statistical Office off Mongolia (2006). *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics, Dec. 2006*. Ulaanbaatar

biodiversity of the country, the large livestock numbers are not, and parts of the unique landscape are threatened by overgrazing, soil erosion and, as a result, desertification[6]. More than thirteen times as much livestock compared to people are living in Mongolia[7], and with the transition from communism to democracy in 1990, capitalism found its way to the country (bringing with it the competition of a free market), leading to ever increasing livestock numbers, which consequently put an even higher pressure on the valuable pastures[9]. Up to today, nearly 14 % of Mongolia has been assigned some kind of conservation status under the fourfold classification system for Protected Areas (established in 1995)[10]. It is the current aim of the government to expand this system again, targeting an overall coverage of 30 % of the land, adding a planned 9.4 million hectares of land to the network until 2015.

Those Mongolians who gave up their pastoralist lifestyle are to be found in one of the few big cities, Ulaanbaatar being the biggest one, harbouring almost one third of the population[2]. The majority earns a living by working in the service (gastronomy, tourism, banking,...) or the industrial (oil, mining, construction materials,...) sector[4]. In 2005, the official unemployment rate was 3.3 %[10], but especially in and around the cities poverty is increasing[11] and an FAO-report notes that there is a growing population of low income groups[11]. The same report categorises Mongolia as a *Low Income Food Deficit Country (LIFDC)* with increasing segments of the population which have "*extremely limited access to financial resources to purchase food, from a market which is being increasingly liberalized*"[11]. This clearly underpins the status of Mongolia as a developing country, justifies future support and signals the necessity of a continuous effort to establish successful development projects.

From an environmental point of view, the country currently deals with the following issues[5]:

- Overgrazing
- Deforestation in some areas
- Soil erosion and desertification
- Conversion of virgin to agricultural land
- Lack of enforcement of environmental laws
- Limited natural fresh water resources in some areas
- Negative effects of rapid urbanisation and industrial growth
- Air pollution (esp. In UB) due to the burning of soft coal in power plants

[9] FERNANDEZ-GIMENEZ, M.E. (2006). *Land Use and Land Tenure in Mongolia: A Brief History and Current Issues*. USDA Forest Service Proceedings RMRS-P-39

[10] Ministry of Nature and Environment Mongolia (2007). *Mongolia's Third National Report on Implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity*. Ulaanbaatar

[11] FAO (1996). *Crop and Food Supply Situation in Mongolia - Special report*. FAO Global Information and early warning system on food and agriculture. URL: http://www.fao.org/docrep/004/w3333e/w3333e00.HTM. Retrieved: 07.05.2007

Khonin Nuga

"*Khonin Nuga*" is a valley, located close to the *Khentey Mountains* of Northern Mongolia, one of the country's unique and still largely untouched places. Here, were the Sibirian forest belt borders the steppe, altogether 15.000 km² of primeval forest and grassland are completely protected by the law, creating the Strictly Protected Area *Khan Khentey.* The *Khonin Nuga*-valley lies in the West-Khentey region, in the buffer zone of the protected area, where the two rivers *Hong* and *Sharlang* join to form one new stream, the river *Eroo*, which is the upper part of the drainage system of *Lake Baikal* (Russia)[12].

In 1997, as a result of a partnership between the National University of Mongolia (NUM) and the Georg-August-University in Goettingen (GAUG, Germany), a research station was established in the region. Named *Khonin Nuga*, according to the valley where the station is located, this impressive outpost of both universities currently comprises six buildings (field laboratories, meeting room, kitchen, acommodation) and a seventh one is about to be built. Apart from buildings the present equipment comprises five Mongolian Gers, one Jeep, a Russian Microbus, 18 horses and several scientific instruments, tools and appropriate literature[11]. While the majority of the management is carried out by a graduated Mongolian[13], during the fieldwork-period, an additional person is employed to take care of the cooking and a second person is hired for guarding the station, driving and mechanics. The local ranger[14] of the Protected Area often assists with excursions and his sons help with many of the issues related to the keeping of all the horses.

The main objectives of the research at Khonin Nuga are[11]:

- To address fundamental questions of ecology by means of reference studies in an environment largely untouched by civilization.
- To evaluate the conservation value of the region, considering the presence of a near-pristine landscape, the occurrence of species which are threatened elsewhere, and including the analysis of communities in primeval habitats as reference for an assessment of the anthropogenic impact on species communities in Europe.

These objectives require an interdisciplinary approach, and so far several research teams from a number of scientific backgrounds have worked at the station, conducting surveys of plants, insects, small mammals, birds and fish, thus contributing to accomplishing the aims of the ongoing ecological research.

[12] MÜHLENBERG, M. (2007). *Ecology and dynamics of a Southern Taiga System*. Unpublished.
[13] Mrs. A. Enkhmaa (MSc. Biology)
[14] Mr. Myagmasuren

My work

During my time at the research station I was involved into three different research topics, two of which required hands-on fieldwork only, while the third one was research-based:

I) Breeding biology of the Azure-winged Magpie (Cyano picacyanus)

Together with me, Jennifer Beyer, a biology student from the University of Goettingen arrived at Khonin Nuga. Her objektive was to conduct the fieldwork for her diploma-thesis, a study of the local Azure-winged magpie population. To be more precise, she aimed to find out whether the Mongolian *Cyano picacyanus* is a cooperative breeder and if so, she wants to determine the reason for this kind of social behaviour. Cooperative breeding means that some of the individuals of a population refuse to produce own offspring by themselves, in favour of their kin. These individuals, termed *helpers*, usually do so to increase the survival rate of their kin's offspring. Generally, helpers engage in a number of breeding activities, like territory defence, construction and maintenance of nests, incubation, brooding and feeding nestlings (*and* the breeding pair sometimes) as well as the feeding and tending of the fledglings[15]. Whether all or only some of those activities could be observed in the local magpie population was, in part, the subject of Ms. Beyer's work.

Of course, biological studies of this kind require a particular approach and a certain study design. In this case, first of all the study site (riparian woodland, dominated by *Salix spec*. and *Crataegus spec*.) needed to be searched thoroughly for existing magpie nests. After their determination, these nests were then appropriately marked to be able to observe them later on, during the research period (three months). Altogether, we found sixteen nests, twelve of which were still in use and contained eggs (between three to seven eggs per nest). After locating them, we also took photos of the nests regularly; thus we were able to see whether egg numbers were increasing (new eggs laid) or decreasing (due to predation). We also talked about methods to determine the kind of predators that might be in the area but have not installed any of the discussed devices while I was still working at the station.

To describe the behaviour of an individual it is necessary to mark this particular bird. The general practice is to use rings, fitted onto the legs of the individual, but of course, to do so, it is necessary to catch the bird first. The standardised method for catching birds alive is the so-called *mist-netting* with specially constructed nets (usually about two to three

[15] STACEY, P.B. & KOENIG, W.D. (Ed.) (1990). *Cooperative breeding in birds. Long-term studies of ecology and behaviour*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, U.K.

metres in height and six or twelve metres in length). A bird flies into the net, is captured in one of the net's pockets and can then be collected from there. In order to prevent the bird from any kind of harm after it has been caught (severe stress, dehydration, starvation,...), the nets are checked in 1-hour-intervals and closed at night. Each caught bird is weighed, measured according to specific guidelines and then fitted with a metal ring. In the case of Ms. Beyers' study, the metal rings came from the *Vogelwarte Helgoland* and each piece had an individual number engraved. To be able to visually distinguish one bird from another during the upcoming behavioural studies, they were also colour-banded (with rings of different colours and different colour combinations). Of course, not only magpies were caught during the study but only they were treated according to the above description – all other species were merely identified and then released immediately. To prevent the birds from learning (and then avoiding) the net locations, the mist-nets were taken down and pitched up again randomly at various places throughout the study site (places, judged as promising for a catch).

While no preliminary results can be released at the time of writing this report, I took part in all of the activities described above and gained valuable experience with regards to the trapping and handling of small birds as well as the (breeding-) biology of the magpie.

II) Fire-ecology of boreal taiga forests

Ecosystems around the world are influenced by a number of different „disturbances" (earthquakes, floods, fires, storms etc.) – i.e. they are subject to distinct *disturbance-regimes*. In boreal forests, fire[16] is very often one of the main disturbances and this is true for forest ecosystems in Mongolia as well. In the northern part of the country however, the occurrence of fires is increasing and the majority of these fires are caused by humans. In Mongolia, 98.5 % of the forests are classified as high fire risk areas[17].

To further investigate the influence of fires on the forests of West Khenthey, a Mongolian PhD-student is going to carry out appropriate research for the majority of the coming three years. The main difficulty during such a study is that the re-growth of a forest ecosystem after a fire happens very slowly. However, if long-term ecological consequences and interconnections are to be determined properly, at least 30 to 50 years of observation would need to be considered. Naturally, if results are needed after three years already, it is impossible to look at one research site for 50 years and elaborate on the processes that take

[16] GOLDAMMER, J.G., FURYAEV, V.V. (1996): *Fire in ecosystems of boreal Eurasia*. Kluwer Academic Publ., Dordrecht, 528p
[17] World Bank 2002: *Mongolia Environment Monitor*. Ulaanbaatar, 38p

place at this specific site. Hence, to be able to achieve valid results within a short period, the establishment of so-called *chronosequences* is required. Creating a chronosequence means that not only one area is studied continuously for a long period, but more areas in different development stages (after a fire) will be considered. For this kind of study-design, a number of forest areas (same forest type, e.g. *Betula-Larix* stand for each area) need to found, which are known to have burned in specific time-periods (e.g. 0–5 years ago, 6–10 years ago, 11–20 years ago, etc.). Each of these different life-cycle stages is likely to be distinctively different with regards to its current flora and fauna. Thus, a parallel assessment of a number of such sites (including replicates) within the coming three years is supposed to yield valuable insights concerning plant succession and the re-colonisation of animal species in different time periods after a fire incident.

It was my task in this context to assist with the search for suitable study sites. For this reason we went on a number of daytrips on horseback, visiting certain areas in the Khentey-region, e.g. *Ulaan Huud* (severe fire seven years ago), *Sangstai*-forest (climax forest without recent fire incident), *Hot springs* (forest were burning while I was at *Khonin Nuga*) and collected preliminary ecological data, destined to help in the proper design of the upcoming studies.

III) Mongolia biodiversity profile

The final project I helped with was the creation of a so-called *biodiversity profile* for Mongolia. The profile was aimed at reflecting the significant ecological values of the country against the background of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Based on appropriate scientific literature, talks with government officials and drawing from the knowledge gathered during the past ten years of research at Khonin Nuga, I wrote an appropriate paper.

Evaluation of the period in Mongolia and hints for other students

What I could say about the IUCN as an internship placement proved to be absolutely true for Khonin Nuga too: The research station is extremely well suited for an internship. I only spent about 1.5 months in Mongolia, but considering the fact that I split my practical semester into two parts, I think the chosen length of this second part was more or less perfect. Nevertheless, the research station offers a wealth of opportunities and it is well worth spending a full semester over there, probably even conducting an own small project. My period at the station was filled with interesting tasks, exciting adventures, and pleasant encounters, be they

encounters with people or wildlife. Especially for students aiming to work across borders, on a global level (i.e. M.I.N.C-students), an internship at the station is an excellent preparation for any kind of international project. Khonin Nuga confronts the student with a wealth of interesting things to learn: project management questions, logistical problems, scientific problems, cultural as well as language barriers, social issues and many other tasks.

The person to talk to if one is interested in spending some time close to the Khan Khentey area is Prof. Dr. Mühlenberg, the head of the Centre for Nature Conservation at the University of Goettingen. Ten years ago, the research station was built as a result of his personal initiative and since then he has been its leading scientists and manager. He is familiar with the region, its specific problems and the current scientific research conducted there. Thus, he is able to point out specific tasks and projects an interested student could be working at. More detailed information about the research at Khonin Nuga (incl. appropriate pictures) can also be found at the website of the Centre for Nature Conservation[18].

Prior to deciding for or against Mongolia/Khonin Nuga as an internship placement, it is important to realise the following things:

- **Travel:** *To the country:* From Germany, three airlines fly to Ulaanbaatar regularly (usually with a stopover in Moscow): MIAT (Mongolian airline), Aeroflot (Russian airline) and Air China. Typically, tickets cost between 750 and 1100 €, depending on the booking time. The rule of thumb: The sooner you book, the cheaper! *Travelling inside the country:* Mongolia is a place of almost epic proportions but it has an underdeveloped infrastructure. The travel from the capital to the research station will consume at least 10 hours by car (4-wheel-drive necessary). The first five to six hours one travels on rather bad asphalt roads until reaching Zuunkharaa, the city closest to the station. The next four hours will be travelled on extremely bad and bumpy gravel- and forest roads. All in all it is a tiring journey but it is bearable and a number of stops on the way enable to stretch the legs and relax a bit. However: Always be prepared to expect the unexpected: A puncture that necessitates the changing of a wheel, a breakdown of the car for other reasons or organisational issues that make it necessary to spend a night somewhere before reaching the station.
- **Phone and Internet:** While living at Khonin Nuga one should also expect to be cut off from the rest of the world. Mobile phones will not work and there is no internet connection. There is a satellite phone at the station but the connection depends on the

[18] URL: http://wwwuser.gwdg.de/~ubns/Khoninuga/index.htm

weather conditions and it is thought only for use in emergencies. Every week (sometimes every two weeks) a car will drive to Zuunkharaa to buy food and take care of other issues. Occasionally there might be an opportunity to join the driver on this trip: There is an internet cafe in the city and mobile phones will have reception.

- **Accommodation:** In 2006 a new "student-house" was constructed. It is a wooden house (like all buildings at Khonin Nuga) with 6 rooms, each furnished with more or less primitive wooden beds. Depending on the amount of people at the station one either has an own room, or shares a cabin with one or two people. A thin mattress is going to be provided, so it is not necessary to bring an own (however, a kind of iso-mattress might be more comfortable and quite useful for a longer trip while sleeping in tents). There are no specific washing facilities, so for the daily hygiene water from the river will have to be used. This year, a wooden shower cabin was built, close to the river (constructed for a solar shower which uses water from the river too...).
- **Food:** While it is not at all impossible for vegetarians to spend time at the station, Mongolian people typically eat a lot of meat and, apart from breakfast, most of the dishes are prepared with some kind of meat (traditionally: mutton, but most of the time beef). A lot of the cooking is done with potatoes, rice, pasta and vegetables – fruits (except for apples) and salad ingredients are more or less unavailable. Breakfast consists in general of dark or self-baked white bread (absolutely delicious!), butter, sausage, cheese, jam, choc-spread and occasionally muesli. Drinking water as well as the water for cooking comes straight from the adjacent river (very clean water). Things like chocolate, sweets, crisps, alcohol or any other things one cannot live without should be bought in Ulaanbaatar and then brought to the camp.
- **Weather**: Research at the station is being conducted between May and the end of September; the remainder of the year is usually too cold for work. In general, the weather is rather unpredictable, ranging from cloudy grey days with snow on the surroundding hills and mountains to lovely sunny days with a clear blue sky (almost everything is possible: hail, strong winds, rain...). During the night, temperatures between 0° and + 10° Celsius are normal, but it can get down to – 5° C as well. During daytime it can get as hot as + 35° C.
- **Horses:** Don't be afraid of horses and trust yourself to be able to ride one. Due to the terrain (e.g. it is necessary to cross rivers) and the enormous distances between different places it is a must to use horses for your work – often on a daily basis.

Those who don't perceive the above mentioned points as scary or discouraging and still want to spend some time at the research station need to approach Prof. Mühlenberg and come to an agreement with him. In case this agreement is found, the whole experience starts with the Visa issue. Because applying for a Visa can be a rather daunting and somewhat complicated procedure I will describe the application process below. Even though this description is quite detailed, it is important to keep in mind that these things seem to change frequently and it is therefore necessary to check whether the information I have given here is still up-to-date![19] The first question which needs to be considered is: "*How long do I want to stay in Mongolia*"? In case one doesn't plan to stay for longer than 30 days, things are relatively easy.

Staying for a period ***shorter*** **than 30 days**:

Version A: *Getting a Visa* ***prior*** *to entering Mongolia:* German students can simply apply for an appropriate Visa from the ***Embassy of Mongolia*** in Berlin (foreign students may have to apply at the Mongolian Embassy or Consulate in their home-country). For the application one needs to send the following documents/fees to the embassy:

1) Traveller Passport
2) One passport-photo (usually not older than three months)
3) Visa-application-form (downloadable from the embassy website)[20]
4) Visa-fee (currently *35 €,* to be transferred to the embassy's bank account)[21]

Visas for a stay shorter than 30 days can be issued rather quickly, however you should be prepared for the process to take ~ 14 days.

Version B: *Getting a Visa when entering Mongolia (at the airport in Ulaanbaatar):* According to Dr. Samiyaa (National University of Mongolia) it is also possible to buy a short-term-Visa (for less than 30 days) at the airport in Ulaanbaatar, upon arrival. However, at the time of writing this, no information about the documents one needs to bring along or the required fees could be obtained – hence, it is not recommendable to get a Visa this way.

Staying for a period ***longer*** **than 30 days**:

In case you plan to stay in Mongolia for longer than 30 days, the Visa-application-process becomes slightly more complicated. First of all, the Visa costs depend on how long one stays:

- For periods between 30 and 90 days the Visa-fee amounts to 75 €
- For periods between 90 and 180 days the fee will be 85 €
- For a stay up to 360 days one will have to pay 105 €

[19] URL: http://www.botschaft-mongolei.de/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=15&Itemid=33
[20] URL: http://www.botschaft-mongolei.de/PDFdaten/visa_antrag.pdf
[21] Botschaft der Mongolei, Stichwort.: „Visagebühren", Dresdner Bank, Kontonr.: 40 516 843 00, BLZ .: 120 800 00

As for the Tourist-Visa, in addition to transferring the appropriate fee, you will have to send:

1) Traveller Passport
2) One passport-photo (usually not older than three months)
3) Visa-application-form (downloadable from the embassy website)

***Here is where the difference begins**:* To get the permission to stay in the country for more than 30 days one also needs an invitation from an institution in Mongolia. The first person to talk to with regards to this invitation is Prof. Mühlenberg. He will contact the National University of Mongolia (NUM) and send them a letter, listing the students who are going to work at Khonin Nuga. In this way, NUM's Department of Foreign Affairs will know who is coming to Mongolia to visit the research station. To prepare the required invitation letter for a student, the people at NUM need a number of documents/fees[22]:

- *Copy* of your traveller-passport
- Three Passport photos
- University application form (downloadable at NUM's website)
- Additional health-certificate (downloadable at NUM's website)
- Application fee: 20 $
- Invitation fee: 5100 Tugrik (about 6 $)

The main trouble is the health-certificate: To fill it in completely, one has to get an *x-ray photo of the chest*, confirming that one does not suffer from tuberculosis or any other contagious disease. One will also have to get the *lung-function*, *HIV-status*, and *vision* tested. They even require a *language-test* (medical-test, not language qualification) and some other information. Satisfying all requirements listed in the health-certificate does take some time and involves quite some costs. Due to the fact that these examinations are not based on medical necessity (i.e. an existing disease), they are not covered by personal (social) health insurance and need to be paid by oneself! An HIV-test usually cost anything between 20 and 30 €, but unfortunately the rest can amount up to 200 €.

Having managed to obtain the above-mentioned information, all the documents need to be sent to the university in Mongolia via regular mail. It is a good idea to make copies (or scans) and send everything early enough. When the documents arrive at NUM, they will be processed accordingly and a messenger gets them to the two supervising authorities (together with NUM's invitation letter): The Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). While MoE will simply acknowledge the general information, MoFA will double-check all the documents and finally send a fax to the embassy in Germany, giving its

[22] Fees can usually be paid after arrival in Mongolia.

consent to issue the Visa. After receiving this fax, the embassy usually sends the passport incl. the Visa back to the applicant within three days. However, to be on the safe side, it is a good idea to phone the embassy once in a while, inquiring about the stage of the application process.

Getting a Visa for longer stays is, without any doubt, a costly and time-consuming issue. There is, however, one way of ***avoiding this tiring procedure:*** One can apply for a simple short-term-Visa (less than 30 days, *see above*) at the embassy in Berlin, pay the fee of 35 €, fly to Mongolia and then get permission to stay longer while one is already ***in*** the country. Doing this, of course, involves additional costs and it is nearly impossible without suitable contacts. However, Prof. Mühlenberg *does* have these contacts and together with Mongolian assistance he can take care of these things. Every additional day one spends in the country (day 31 to 365) currently costs ~ 3000 Tugrik (~ 2 €). So, even if one spends another 60 days in Mongolia this will cost ~ 120 € rather than the 200 € one would have to pay for all the required examinations. Prof. Mühlenberg also supports this way of dealing with the Visa, so it is probably the most recommendable solution.

Apart from the charges for the Visa, additional costs might occur for appropriate clothing (see list below) and recommendable vaccination. There are a lot of ticks in the area and thus a FSME-vaccination is a very good thing to have. Moreover, your regular vaccination-status should be up to date (Diphterie, Tetanus, etc.) and a rabies-vaccination might be useful.

Things to bring along:

- Clothing for cold and warm weather (thermo-underwear, fleece,...)
- A warm sleeping bag (suitable for temperatures down to – 10 ° C)
- Something suitable for use as a pillow (*if you need one*)
- Good shoes (that keep your feet warm and protected)
- Clothing that allows you to work during rain
- Work-related and private literature
- Sunblock Lotion
- Toiletries
- Camera
- Binoculars
- Torch & Knife
- Basic First-Aid Equipment
- Money (not for the camp but for own purposes in Ulaanbaatar etc. ...)

Compared to an internship in the "developed world", Mongolia is much less expensive. While food (except for imported commodities) is rather cheap (5 € will get you a first class meal), accommodation in Ulaanbaatar is somewhat more expensive (a cheap room costs ~ 25 € per night). However, the National University of Ulaanbaatar and the University of Goettingen have a special agreement: For the handful of days one might have to spend in the capital prior to the departure to the research station, every student will usually get a room at NUM's international student house. Thus, in general, students do not have to pay additional costs for accommodation. The only definite expenses are a contribution to the food-costs (depending on the length of ones stay at the research station) – but that is basically everything. All in all, the main cost-factor is the flight: As mentioned above it costs between 750 and 1100 €, depending on the booking and travel time. This is a rather huge amount and securing appropriate funding to cover these costs is very important. As a (German) M.I.N.C.-student it should be relatively easy to get a short-term scholarship from the *German Academic Exchange Service* (*DAAD* → see website www.daad.de). Because I already received such a stipend for the IUCN-component of my internship semester, the DAAD was not prepared to pay for Mongolia as well. Luckily, I was granted a short-term scholarship from the *German National Academic Foundation* (*Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes*) and hence I could thoroughly enjoy my stay, without having to worry about money-matters.

Because there is currently no other document available which summarises all the important issues concerning a study-trip to Khonin Nuga in Mongolia, I have given a rather detailed description in this report. It should give every interested student/visitor a good idea of what to expect and what not, and, at the same time, help to successfully prepare the trip.

Summarising my stay in Mongolia I can only say that I had an exceptional time, above all, because I did exactly what I was aiming for: A lot of practical work! Be it the help with the Azure-winged magpie-thesis or the fire-ecology PhD, the maintenance of the camp, the exchange with the students from Mongolia or the horse-trips to some of the remote ecosystems in the Khan Khentey Area – I have learned a lot and gathered valuable experience. I thoroughly enjoyed my stay and I am grateful to Prof. Mühlenberg and the Studienstiftung for making it possible! Khonin Nuga was truly one of the highlights of M.I.N.C-studies: Lovely Mongolian hospitality, great food, enthusiastic people, impressing wildlife and the beauty as well as the silence of an intact and largely untouched landscape… And galloping on a horse through the open steppe plains is one of those memories I will surely never forget for the rest of my life...