

Essays of a Peripheral Mind

Speaking other languages

By **K. M. Havstad**

Here is an example of a serious commitment to your college education. In order to simply attend a university, you need to successfully complete your secondary education and pass your entrance exams, then get on a horse with a few belongings, ride for days to reach a rail line, embark on a 5- to 7-day train ride across the continent, attend classes taught in a foreign language you may not know very well at all, and seldom visit your home before your education is complete.

Early in October 2006, I met Dr. D. Avaadorj (Fig. 1), a soil scientist and member of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences working out of Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia. I'd guess he was in his mid-60s and still very active in his discipline, in fact, still working at field sites across Mongolia on extensive campaigns to collect data and apply his knowledge to solving his country's resource use problems. His intense curiosity and intellectual capacity were quite in evidence and obviously lifelong traits. I hope to have his energy at his age. He had begun his formal education over 4 decades ago. Given the geopolitical landscape in Asia at that time, this meant that he attended universities in Russia and Germany. Of course, it also meant he learned his technical skills in German and Russian. To attend schools in Moscow and Berlin from Mongolia in the middle of the 20th century, he had to have the commitment outlined in the opening paragraph above. From that academic training through the early 1990s, he worked for over 3 decades in Mongolia under a Soviet influence. His fluency in Russian and German provided him with access to the technical information

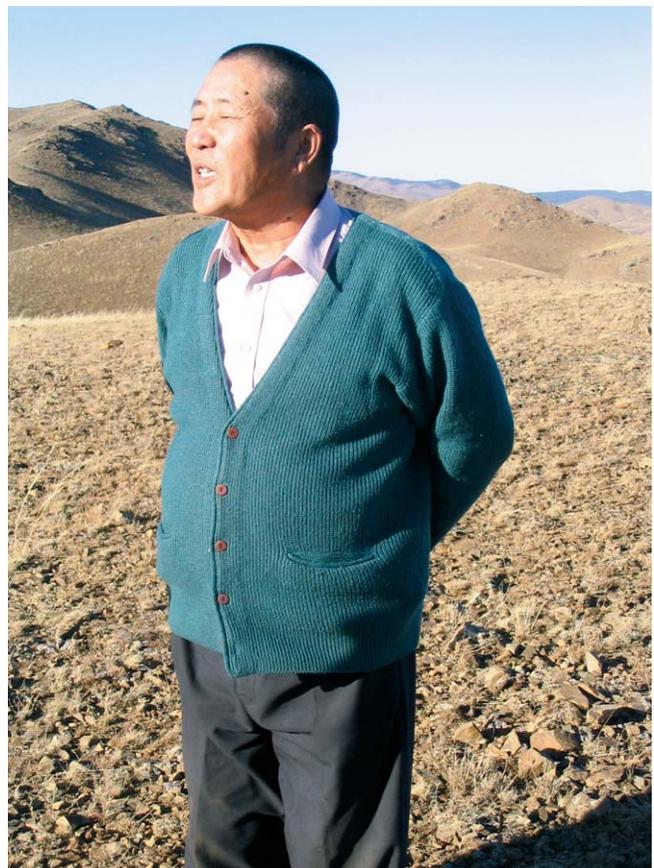


Figure 1. Dr. Avaadorj of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences.

he needed during that period as he worked as a rangeland soil scientist.

Dr. Avaadorj's political, cultural, educational, and agricultural environment changed drastically, of course, in the early 1990s with the withdrawal of the Soviets, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and subsequent democratic elections in Mongolia. The changes accompanying the Soviet withdrawal were substantial, and it would be an easy and overly simplistic assessment, from an American perspective, to celebrate this change as nothing but positive. Certainly, with this shift from socialism, Mongolia became more accessible to the rest of the world. In reality, though, it has been a long road over the past 15 years, and democracy and a freer economy have not meant quick prosperity. There are many illustrations of the impacts of this change. For example, the loss of the Soviets' centralized veterinary services has resulted in an uneven privatized system that has contributed to frequent outbreaks of contagious animal diseases. With 65% of Mongolia's rural herders living at or below the poverty line (a social allowance per child may be just \$2.50 per month), veterinary services are not always readily available to all in an open-market system. There are also vast expanses of abandoned cropland where the Soviets had cultivated grains in the rich basin soils across Mongolia. These eroding landscapes are surrounded by clustered shells of abandoned combines and dairy barns that serve as a testament to that former presence. For a country with an 800-year history, these are the newest artifacts of Mongolia's human archaeology. In addition, natural disasters know no political orientations, and the severe summer droughts and heavy winters (*dzuds*) of 1999 and 2002 resulted in the death of nearly 10 million livestock, about one-third of the country's total herd. Overall, the Soviet absence left many voids, including the loss of access to considerable information accumulated by the Soviets important to management of Mongolian resources.

The Western world, both governments and donor organizations, has worked to fill these voids in the ensuing years. For a better introduction to this region, see the USDA Forest Service Proceedings RMRS-P-39 (Bedunah, McArthur, and Fernandez-Gimenez, 2006) for a set of papers on central Asia written for a special symposium during the 2004 SRM meeting in Utah (available at <http://www.treesearch.fs.fed.us/pubs/22856>, including writings by people in our profession with considerable experience in this part of the world, in particular, Dennis Sheehy, Don Bedunah, Doug Johnson, and Maria Fernandez-Gimenez, among others). In the summer of 2008, the International Rangeland Congress will be held in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, within the People's Republic of China, and attendees will have an opportunity to tour this region as part of that Congress.

Mongolia is a stunning and immense landscape, the size of Alaska, with a history of rangeland livestock grazing for thousands of years. It is a pastoral environment, and pastoralism will be central to its future. As people like Robert Blench have observed about pastoralism around the world, it will survive not simply by adopting new technologies but by employing perspectives and policies rooted in understanding cultural settings of those resources (see <http://www.fao-kyokai.or.jp/edocuments/document2.pdf>). It will survive because people like Dr. Avaadorj will learn other languages to access information but eventually translate that information back into application in Mongolian and meld it with the rich history of information that exists within Mongolia. For Dr. Avaadorj and his colleagues, they are now being exposed to new ideas, concepts, methods, and approaches on rangeland management filtering in from North America. What it also means is that he, even now in his 60s, is trying to learn English, the current language of these ideas. Talking with him is through a translator, but it is obvious he is grasping quite a bit in English. In private moments he will engage in conversation with me in English. He is making a concerted effort to speak my language.

It has been many years since Dr. Avaadorj has had to ride a horse to reach the outside world from Mongolia. In fact, now the outside world arrives by airplane to Ulaanbaatar, climbs into Land Cruisers, and drives across these landscapes to see the Takhi, the wild horses of Mongolia. In a sense, we've come full circle. What I am reminded of in visiting with Dr. Avaadorj while also thinking about global issues of rangeland management is that much of our understanding of rangeland management is rooted in many different languages. Dr. Avaadorj has had to learn several other languages in order to practice his profession. And he is still learning new languages in order to maintain his relevance. Even though considerable technical information is now widely available in English, I'll never understand rangeland management around the globe (or even just in North America) by just knowing English. Too much relevant information is embedded outside the English-speaking world in the same fashion that Dr. Avaadorj recognizes that too much information is embedded outside Mongolia. Short of traversing a continent by horseback and train, I'll need to have a similar commitment as Dr. Avaadorj has demonstrated and learn to speak other languages as well.

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