



EIU Best Case Studies Series **No.9**

# Integrating Sacred Natural Sites Concept into Environmental Education

EIU Best Case Studies 2008



# Foreword

As a regional centre mandated to promote Education for International Understanding (EIU) towards a Culture of Peace in Asia and the Pacific region, Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding (APCEIU) under the auspices of UNESCO has been engaged in various endeavors aimed at fulfilling its mandate since its inception. EIU Best Case Studies was launched by APCEIU in 2006 in cooperation with the Member States in the region to encourage local initiatives on EIU.

EIU aims to promote, in particular, “Learning to Live Together”, among the four pillars of education set forth in the Delors report, through participatory learning and critical thinking. EIU Best Case Studies brings and explores various efforts in the region aimed at promoting “Learning to Live Together”.

Asia and the Pacific region, with some of the major flashpoints of the world, have long been plagued by a history of socio-political conflicts often intersected by contending issues of ethnic and religious nature. In the era of globalization, ensuring education towards a culture of peace and a sustainable future has become critical more than ever for a common prosperous future of all humanity. Launched with this background, EIU Best Case Studies is an outreach effort that seeks to encourage and further local initiatives on peace, human rights, intercultural understanding and sustainability in different social and cultural contexts.

This series no. 9 introduces a case from Mongolia on how the tradition related to sacred sites can serve as an effective tool in

promoting environmental education. With the rapid pace of development and technological advances, ensuring environmental sustainability is of critical importance today. The idea from which this case study stemmed is indeed innovative in that it views the sacred sites not just as the subject of preserving the traditions, but also as a significant place where people can learn and share knowledge about nature and the environment. We hope that the researcher's commitment continues on to further efforts geared towards developing activities that incorporate the concept of sacred sites, in particular, to raise awareness among the young generation, be it extracurricular or otherwise.

I hope that through the EIU Best Case Studies, various practices and forms of pedagogy for EIU can be shared among educators, scholars and policy makers who are committed to promoting a Culture of Peace in the region. I expect this project can provide a forum to share and exchange our experiences and perspectives.

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to the National Commissions for UNESCO in the region, in particular, Mongolian National Commission for this case study, the experts and the selection committee members for their kind support and cooperation in carrying out this project.

November 2008



Kang Dai-Geun  
Director

## EIU Best Case Studies is...

APCEIU has been committed to the promotion of a Culture of Peace since its inception in line with one of the pillars of education, "Learning to Live Together". Education for International Understanding (EIU), a concept adopted by UNESCO that encompasses cultural diversity, globalization, human rights, peace and sustainability, focuses on increasing the capacities of learners to deal with issues of everyday life, to resolve community conflict and to enjoy human, political and civil rights to a greater extent.

APCEIU launched EIU Best Case Studies in 2006 in order to explore and encourage local initiatives on EIU in Asia and the Pacific region. It is an outreach programme that invites educators, researchers, activists and scholars to share their efforts in promoting education for a culture of peace in different social and cultural contexts. The programme further seeks to encourage critical reflections on the diverse forms of pedagogy used and the challenges encountered in the cases that are shared, through which optimal classroom conditions and activities, school climate and social atmosphere towards a Culture of Peace can be identified. EIU Best Case Studies envisions promoting a Culture of Peace at four different levels, namely, peaceful classroom, peaceful school climate, peaceful community and peaceful society.

The programme is conducted through the following steps: 1) announcement: APCEIU sends announcement letters along with application forms and guidelines to the 47 National Commissions for UNESCO of the Member States in the region; 2) screening and selection: submitted proposals are reviewed by the Screening Committee composed of experts, and the best proposals are selected; 3) field visit: APCEIU staff undertake field visits to the programme sites of the selected case study proposals to confer the EIU Best Case Studies awards, conduct field observation and interviews, and provide

the researcher with the guidelines for the final case study report; 4) submission of the final case study reports: the researchers submit the final case study reports to APCEIU based on the guidelines; and 5) publication and dissemination: the final case study reports are published as monograph series and disseminated throughout the region.

Given the favorable and enthusiastic responses from the region and the support from the National Commissions for UNESCO, APCEIU wishes to build on the positive momentum thus far established and further its efforts for the coming years.

The Centre encourages educators, scholars and activists from Asia and the Pacific region to apply and share their experiences and perspectives. APCEIU expects that through the EIU Best Case Studies, various practices of EIU will be widely shared throughout the whole region, thus contributing towards a Culture of Peace.

# Researcher



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Diversity through the Sacred Sites of Mongolia” as well as research on the Khoit Tsenkher cave and Tsagaan Salaa rock painting in preparation for its World Heritage Site nomination.

She is also the author of “Sacred Sites in Mongolia and Biodiversity Conservation” and “Mongolian Sacred Site: Tradition and Value” and co-author of “Natural and Cultural Heritages of World Heritage Site - Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape”.

At a UNESCO workshop, “The Integrated Values-Based Management of Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape World Heritage Site” held in Kharkhorin soum, Uvurkhangai province, 25-28 August 2008, she gave a presentation on “Tradition of Worshipping Sacred Mountains in World Heritage Site” based on the results of a survey on intangible heritages of Mongolia.





# Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deep appreciation to Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding (APCEIU) for giving support and opportunities for researchers and educators from Asia-Pacific countries to exchange knowledge, experiences and good practices.

I am very happy that my case study entitled “Integrating Sacred Natural Sites Concept into Environmental Education” was selected as one of the EIU Best Case Studies 2008 and published with the invaluable support and assistance of APCEIU.

On this occasion, I also would like to extend my thanks to the Mongolian National Commission for UNESCO for its kind assistance. My sincere gratitude also goes to every teacher, student, monk and the local community living in the World Heritage Site - Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape for their contribution and involvement in the case study.

November 2008  
Duurenjargal Ayush

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# Abstract

In the 21st century, people around the world have begun to recognize the necessity of living in harmony with nature and promoting environmental education. The tradition of worshipping sacred sites can be used as an important tool in promoting environmental education, especially considering the importance of linking old traditions with modern environment protection methods to enhance the quality of teaching. The sacred sites are not just the subject of preserving traditions, but also a significant place where people can share knowledge about nature and the environment, as well as the history and culture of the country.

However, today's young generation does not have adequate knowledge and information on traditional rituals related to nature conservation. These traditions and values should be passed on to the younger generation through various activities that would improve their overall understanding about nature. The current situation calls for merging the existing educational programs and activities aimed at environment protection with the concept of the sacred sites.

The case study is aimed at raising educators' level of understanding of how the sacred sites concept can be used to improve education on environmental issues and sustainable development. This can also serve as a good example of how to preserve cultural diversity.

The local community, school teachers and students living around the sacred sites in Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape - World Heritage Site were involved in the case study. Questionnaires and interviews

were used to collect data for the case study.

In reviewing the case study, it was concluded that environmental education is not alien to the school curricula in Mongolia. However, the school textbooks do not give sufficient information on the overall concept of preserving and protecting nature, and fail to integrate cultural traditions. In this regard, there is an obvious need to expand the school curricula and extracurricular activities on environmental education, while integrating the traditions and customs related to protecting nature. It was also revealed that students could learn more effectively through different types of activities that emphasize the importance of traditional methods for environment protection. Finally, in order to jumpstart and expand environment conservation activities, the government, policy makers, teachers and local communities should pay more attention to integrating the sacred sites concept into environmental education.



## Integrating Sacred Natural Sites Concept into Environmental Education

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Country Profile

Mongolia is a landlocked country spanning a vast 1.56 million square kilometers on the southernmost fringe of the Great Siberian boreal forest and across the northernmost Central Asian deserts and steppes. Mongolia borders the Russian Federation in the north and the People's Republic of China in the east. It has a total population of 2.7 million (2006), with some one million living in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, making Mongolia the least densely populated country in the world. Approximately 80% of Mongolian territory is situated at an altitude greater than 1,000 meters, with an average altitude of 1,580 meters. One-third of the territory consists of deserts and desert steppe zones.

The Mongolian landscape shows great contrast and diversity. Forest mountain ranges cover the northern part of Mongolia, while the southern part features deserts and desert steppe areas with low mountains and rolling hills. High, snow-capped mountains are located in the western part, while vast plains and wild heaths cover the eastern part.

Tibetan Buddhism is the predominant religion in Mongolia. The majority (90%) of the population are ethnic Mongols, although there are also Buriats, Kazakhs and Tuvas living in the country, especially in the west.

Mongolia is administratively divided into 21 aimags (provinces),



which are further divided into soums (districts) and baghs (sub-districts). Ulaanbaatar, the capital, is divided into districts, which are further divided into khoroo (sub - district).

## 1.2. Education Sector Background

The Mongolian Constitution (1992) guarantees free education to its people. The Education Law lays down the fundamental principle of equality in education: every citizen has equal rights to his or her education regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, religion, disability, social status and economic condition. Furthermore, “education shall be humanistic and democratic, universally available and continuing”. These provisions state that Mongolia’s public education system should provide equal access to education.

Mongolia has one of the highest literacy rates (97.8 %) in the world. Since 1990, Mongolia has been transitioning from a socialist, centrally planned state to a democratic state with a liberalized economy. At the same time, its educational system is also undergoing significant reforms. In the early years of the transition, the education system was hit particularly hard by the negative impacts of economic reforms. The major challenge for the system was to maintain the high level of education attainment and literacy that had been achieved in the pre-transition period.

The Mongolian education system consists of the following stages: preschool, primary education, secondary education, vocational and technical training, and higher education. Non-formal education is also provided to complement the formal education sector. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (MECS) is the central education authority in Mongolia. As defined by law, the function of MECS is the promotion and dissemination of education, science, and culture. MECS is the central administrative body that formulates national educational policy and sets the standards for each level of formal education. Provincial governments have education and culture

departments that serve as the local educational authority. These departments are responsible for the administration and management of educational services relating to formal and non-formal education and in-service teacher training.

### 1.3. Nature Conservation

In the 21st century, people from all over the world have begun to recognize the necessity of living harmoniously with the natural environment. People are taking into account the particular features of their immediate environment, aspects of the geographic system's development, as well as old traditions that emphasize life in harmony with the environment.

Nature conservation has always been a key aspect of Mongolian culture. A complex system of conservation has been passed down as part of its cultural tradition. Mongolia has managed to preserve its natural environment in a relatively pristine condition. This is mainly due to the traditional nomadic lifestyle of the Mongols, which was closely connected with the natural environment and had little permanent impact on ecology.

The traditional society of Mongolians developed a nomadic culture. Coexisting with the environment, they are using locally evolved ecological knowledge, socio-cultural practices and religious beliefs to protect nature. This has evolved into traditions that make up the rich historical and cultural heritage left by ancestors.

### 1.4. Traditions for Worshipping and Protecting Nature

The UNESCO Convention (1972) and Program on Man and the Biosphere (MAB), with its World Network of Biosphere Reserves, are unique global instruments recognizing and protecting both cultural and natural heritage in the world. The sacred sites concept is a new perspective in the implementation of the UNESCO



Figure 1. A Mongolian worshipping a sacred tree



Figure 2. Mahakala tree (a sacred tree)

Convention. This is a milestone in the identification, protection and conservation of nature and heritage for future generations. Amid the homogenizing forces of globalization, these sacred sites have vital importance in safeguarding cultural and biological diversity and the spiritual well-being of indigenous people and local communities.

Mongolians have numerous traditions that venerate and protect nature and the environment. They worship the land (mountains, hills, forests, and rocks), water resources (rivers, lakes, and springs) and animal species. This is connected to Mongolia's nature, climate and nomadic civilization and cultures. Mongols depend on nature, meaning that their everyday life has always revolved around a close relationship with their environment. The human-environment interaction was a deep-rooted part of ancient Mongol beliefs, particularly in totemism. Shamanism, which followed totemism, embodied father-heaven and mother-earth worship. According to estimates, there are some 800 sacred sites and venerated mountains in Mongolia. Most of the sacred sites are mountains.

The rituals involved in worshipping sacred sites have the following features:

- Worshipping rituals at sacred places are regular annual events, with extensive participation by Mongolians throughout the country.
- Sacred sites are inevitably cultural and historical places that reflect Mongolian history, traditional customs, lifestyle doctrines, oral literature, festivities, music, manuscripts and sutras as well as religious rituals.
- These traditions carry the nomadic mentality of coexistence in harmony with nature, and reflect ethical values and respect for the land, utilizing natural resources wisely, and adequately addressing ecology and environmental issues.
- Sacred places have also become havens for endangered animals and vegetation, helping to preserve biodiversity in the eco-system.

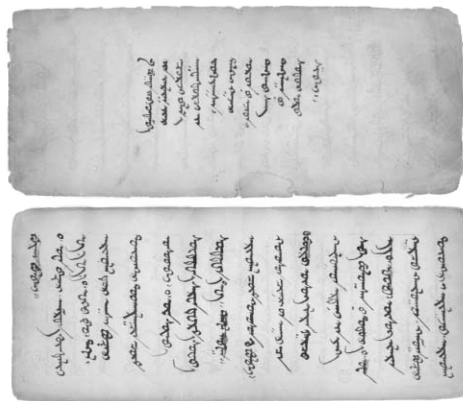


Figure 3. A sutra for sacred mountains

In 1925, J. Tseveen substantially addressed the issues surrounding nature conservation in “Meaning of Mongolian Sacred Reserve Sites”. Aside from H. Perlee’s publication entitled “Mongols’ Traditional Jurisdiction of Nature Conservation”, many well-known scholars and historians such as B. Renchin, S. Badamkhatan and S. Dulam have also published a number of books and articles on the Mongols’ ritual

doctrines, legends and worshipping of sacred places. As a recent example, O. Sukhbaatar emphasized the importance of Mongols' rituals for sacred mountains, traditions and state policies on environmental protection in his publication, "Sutras of Mongols' Worshipping Sacred Mountains" (2001).

Tsorj Agvaandorj wrote a sutra in Mongolian expressing the repentance of someone's sins and mistakes: "We are repenting our sins and mistakes of making burning smells and dirt, killing creatures, digging the land and waters, cutting trees, removing stones, killing animals, settling in sacred places and other sins that were not repented at appropriate times".

### 1.5. Worshipping Rituals at Sacred Sites and Reciting Sutras

Before the worshipping rituals, the appropriate dates must first be selected, decided upon and disseminated to the public. Most worship ceremonies commence at sunrise. Worshippers attend the ceremony with offerings of food, often wearing traditional worshipping attire. The focus of these rituals and practices is the ovoos (stone hills), each of which is considered the home of an ancestral spirit. Four stones are placed on each of the four sides of the ovoo where incense is burned. When the incense is burnt, monks or lamas recite a sutra specific to the mountain.



Figure 4. Children praying before a sacred ovoo (stone hill)

### 1.6. Objectives

At a time of rapid technological advances and dominant ideas of subjugating nature, Mongolia, like many countries, is experiencing environmental degradation, disruption of ecological balance,

abandonment of traditions for environmental protection and the overall decline of moral values due to urbanization, industrialization and pollution.

Since the worshipping ceremony of sacred sites provides insights on environmental conservation, it can also be used as a tool for promotion of ecological education. Moreover, the sacred sites are also significant places for gaining and sharing scientific knowledge and understanding about the environment, and the history and culture of the country.

Thus, there is a vital need to teach the younger generation, through sacred sites concept, how to respect nature. The school curriculum should be expanded to include content and activities on the tradition of environmental protection and sacred sites.

This case study aims to raise understanding and awareness on how the sacred sites concept can contribute to environmental education and education for sustainable development. It serves as a good example on how to conserve ecological and cultural diversity.

The specific objectives are:

- 1) To conduct interviews and survey with questionnaires among the local communities, school teachers and students living around the sacred sites;
- 2) To evaluate the current educational content and teaching materials on environmental issues;
- 3) To study the possibilities of integrating the sacred sites concept into environmental and ecological education; and
- 4) To identify good practices in teaching biodiversity conservation using the sacred sites concept.

### 1.7. Methodology

The local community, school teachers and students living around the sacred sites in Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape - World Heritage Site which covers Kharkhorin, Khotont, Khashaat, Bat-Ulziit, Khujirt

soums, have been involved in the case study.

The case study involved interviews and discussions with the local community, teachers and students about current environment education and worshipping traditions of sacred sites. A questionnaire survey was also conducted among local residents, students and teachers to assess the current level of environment education and knowledge about the sacred sites concept. Current teaching and training materials on environment education were also collected and studied.

## 2. Policies on Sacred Sites

The Mongols have a tradition of extending official protection, through state laws and decrees, to mountains and bodies of water which are worshipped as pristine and sacred natural sites. Laws related to the protection of the natural environment, wildlife, and national territory are found in the “Ikh Zasag Law”, which was promulgated in the 13th century during the time of Chinggis Khaan (Genghis Khan) and “Laws of Altan Khaan” in the 16th century among others.

Over the last few years, the Mongolian government has paid great attention to protecting its pristine environment, fully aware of the vulnerability of the world’s biosphere. The government has implemented several laws aimed at preserving ecological balance, such as the Law on Special Protected Areas (1994); Law on the Buffer Zones of Special Protected Areas (1997); National Program on Special Protected Areas (1998); and State Policy on Ecology (1997). The sacred mountains of Bogd Khan and Khan Khentii (Burkhan Khaldun) were declared as “strictly protected areas” through a Mongolian parliamentary resolution in 1992. Otgontenger Mountain has likewise been accorded special protection. The government also has a scheme to gradually include Khan Khentii, Bogd Khan and

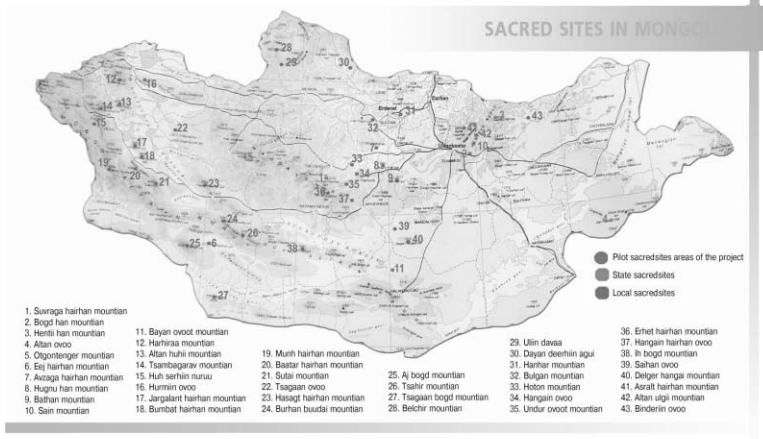


Figure 5. Map of sacred sites in Mongolia

Otgontenger mountains in the UNESCO World Heritage List. In 1996, the Bogd Khan Mountain nature reserve was included in the UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves. There are plans to include other mountains, including Otgontenger and Burkhan Khaldun, in the said network.

Khan Khentii, Otgontenger, and Bogd Khan Khaikhan are three state-worshipped mountains in Mongolia. The first governing state of Mongolia, during the Khunnu times (BC III -AD I), started the tradition of worshipping these mountains, and this continues today. It was in the 13th century that Chinggis Khaan (Genghis Khan) first identified these sites as sacred mountains which were worshipped by his empire. In 1778, the Bogd Khan, Khan Khentii, and Otgontenger mountains were also officially declared as mountain reserves, which are to be worshipped every year. Since 1990, it has become possible to revive national traditions and customs of nature protection in Mongolia, and integrate them into state policies. On 16 May 1995, Mongolia's first president, P. Ochirbat, issued a new decree "supporting initiatives to revive the tradition of worshipping Bogd Khan Khaikhan, Khan Khentii, and Otgontenger mountains". The



decree proclaimed the state's support for initiatives to revive the mountain-worshipping tradition as described in the original Mongolian Legal Document "Ikh Zasagh Law", but adjusted to the present-day conditions. Since the summer of 1995, Khan Khentii, Burkhan Khaldun, and Bogdkhan Khairkhan Mountains have been worshipped as state sacred mountains. The president has participated in some of the worshipping ceremonies.

### 3. Nature Conservation Education

Throughout Mongolian history, the culture of protecting the environment and living in harmony with nature has always been recognized as an important and effective way for sustainable development. The Mongolian tradition of teaching their children is linked to their understanding of nature as well as their attitudes and actions towards the environment.

Nomadic culture and civilization can exist and evolve in harmony with modern technology. The tradition of worshipping sacred places are important in teaching sustainable development.

According to the Buddhist teachings, children and novice monks should be taught to love and protect wildlife and the environment, and adapt these practices in their way of life. Thus in Mongolia, people have traditionally been taught how to live in harmony with the natural environment. They have also been warned that if earth, water, and other natural resources are abused, calamities will ensue.

In the Mongol tradition of education, teachings are passed from one generation to another. Parents taught their children, and brothers and sisters taught younger siblings, and elders taught the subsequent generation. The younger generation is taught to respect the restrictions on nature, and the reproductive capacity of nature. For example:

- Mongols considered the earth as a human being. Children were

taught not to hurt the roots of the earth. It was strictly prohibited to alter the land, chop trees or plants, or hunt in these places. Since childhood, people believed violations of these rules would anger the Lord of Land and Water, bringing misfortune, disease and bad luck to the community.

- Children were taught that if they cut growing trees, the trees would shed milky tears and cause a reduction in milk products for mankind.
- During the spring and summer months, it was prohibited to dig the soil or collect seeds, berries, wild onions, and other plants. People believe that these actions would adversely affect the flow of water into the rivers.
- Mongols considered birds as “animals of the sky.” Children were educated to protect the birds, and not destroy nests or kill the young birds. Birds are considered as very sensitive creatures, that people would not even approach their nests or allow their shadow fall on it.
- Folklore, such as fairytales, legends, songs, prayers, proverbs, and national games were important means of transmitting these lessons to the people.

With the decline of these traditions in today’s modern society, there has been an increase in improper and unsustainable attitudes towards nature. Therefore, there is an urgent need to convey these old values and traditions to the younger generation through special activities and training.

## 4. Case Study

### 4.1. Current Teaching and Training Materials

Based on a study of school textbooks, it was identified that students

learn about environment protection traditions and methods, endangered wildlife and nature in natural sciences classes. Mongolian history textbooks used in 7th and 8th grades include information about ancient customs of nature conservation. It was mentioned that the Burkhan Khaldun Mountain which is included in the Tentative List of the World Heritage Sites was identified as the place of worship by Mongolian tribes that lived for centuries in and around the Kherlen, Onon, Tuul river basin. Botany and biology textbooks for 6th and 7th grades give an overview of flora and fauna as well as the animals' habitat, physiological features and way of life. The textbooks also include information about the government policies on environmental protection.

However, it should be noted the textbooks contain rather limited information about endangered species and nature preservation. Therefore more information about the environment and wildlife protection issues should be included in textbooks. Also some examples of religious ceremonies and traditions of environmental protection, especially worshipping practices of sacred sites should be included as well.

The tradition of protecting nature and the environment was inherited from ancient times, through books, sutras and epics. This heritage should be passed on from one generation to another, but today's young generation lack access to information and knowledge about these traditional rituals.

In conclusion, environmental education is included in the school curricula in Mongolia. However, school textbooks fail to provide sufficient information on the overall concept of nature preservation and protection, especially when it comes to integration of cultural traditions. For instance, during the survey, it was discovered the young generation have no idea about traditional rituals such as the taboos at the sacred sites.

In this regard, there is an obvious need to expand and enrich the school curricula and textbooks' coverage on environmental education,

and to give special attention to the religious worship customs that help protect the environment. Thus, more lessons emphasizing the value and importance of sacred sites should be included in geography, history, ecology, literature and citizenship classes. For example, geography classes should include more information about the sacred sites including the animals and plants in the area, while literature classes should include sutras, legends, epics and songs about the tradition of sacred sites. Furthermore, students can use the time allotted for project work to become involved in worship ceremonies of sacred sites, tree planting activities and discussions with the older generation about the sacred sites tradition.

Also teachers can discuss and give information about past hunting traditions that emphasized wildlife preservation, or the custom of announcing taboo on places of special natural beauty in order to prevent humans from entering and spoiling it, as well as other traditions that instilled respect for nature. Customs such as worshipping the local mountain and hill spirits and removing debris from the areas surrounding the owoo can be explained in connection with environment conservation and reforestation plans.

It is noticeable that linking past traditions with explanations about the modern environment protection methods will greatly enhance the quality of teaching.

#### 4.2. Interview Results on Current Activities on Environmental Education

Interviews and discussions were conducted with the teachers and students of schools located at the five selected places. In total, 21 teachers, mostly teaching history, ecology, literature, citizenship and biology classes, and students from 7th to 11th grades were interviewed. Here are the findings from the interviews and discussions:

Environmental education is provided through lessons about

environment protection traditions and methods, endangered wildlife species and nature, supplemented by watching films, listening to music and exchanging opinions.

It was clear that students learned more effectively by writing essays and term papers about the environment, nature and traditional culture, composing songs and poetry, and participating in various art festivals and competitions.

Also, it is recommended that a list of songs reflecting the beauty and pride of nature be included in the lessons. This may include praise songs such as “Altai Mountain Peak with 13 Peaks, My Khaan Mountain” and “Praise of the Dunjingarav Mountain Peak,” that are usually performed during the sacred mountains’ state worship ceremonies. Other songs that glorify nature’s beauty are “Otgon Tenger Mountain Praise,” and “Khogno Khaan Mountain Praise.”

Each locality has its own unique songs and poetry praising the local natural scenic mountains and rivers, as well as ancient legends and tales. Residents of the capital city of Ulaanbaatar have songs praising the city, the nearby Bogd Mountain, Dunjingarav Peak and Tuul River. Meanwhile, the residents of Ovorkhangai would extol the virtues of the Ongi River, Sangiin Dalai Lake, and Naiman Nuur Lake. At Zavkhan province, residents would not miss a chance to sing about the Otgon Tenger Mountain and Zavkhan River. All these local songs can be included in the schools curricula and extracurricular activities, since they represent a unique form of honoring the beauty of local mountains, rivers and nature. This builds up one’s pride for the native land and enhances the desire to preserve and protect nature.

Art can be effectively used in environmental education. Extracurricular activities, such as drawing images of sacred sites and natural scenery, writing essays about cultural traditions, and organizing painting contests of local scenery and monuments, are important in raising awareness of traditional environment protection customs.

Several schools have initiated monthly programs on environmental

education such as “Water: Our Precious Resource” and “Green Decoration”. Eventually this type of activity may become an important means of disseminating information, and increasing the students’ and faculty’s awareness of the sacred sites concept. This would hopefully prompt teachers, students and their parents to pay more attention to the preservation of old traditions and protection of the nature.

Each year, secondary schools and higher education institutions hold various promotional events on Earth Day, such as lectures, round table discussions, essay-writing and painting contests.

In secondary schools, there is an established tradition for annual, one-month environment protection campaign with themes such as “Water: Our Precious Resource,” “Green Decoration” and “Project Time.” One hour a week is devoted to discussing the issues or activities related to the environment.

One example of such initiatives comes from School No.2 in Kharkhorin, which joined the UNESCO ASPnet School Network in 2005. After the Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape was declared a World Heritage Site, the local provincial school teachers and students started many activities aimed at protecting and promoting the area.

Furthermore, teachers from the Khujirt soum in Ovorkhangai province tell students about the legends and stories about the area’s sacred sites and dedicate 45 minutes of the class to organize environment protection activities.

Teachers and students of the Orkhon complex school, located in Kharkhorin soum, conduct activities such as lectures, consultations and extracurricular projects involving cleaning the environment, tree-planting and growing flowers. One teacher Ts. Tumendemberel organized student excursions such as “Nature-Mother”, “Our World”, “Pure Air-Medicine” and visited the sacred Mountain Khangain ovoo to clean the surrounding area and grow trees around the mountain. She also organized an essay-writing competition among the students on the topic: “What I Know about Sacred Sites;” and a theoretical

conference among teachers and students on ecological conservation. Another teacher from the Shirchinjav school conducted an activity “Let’s Live in a Clean Environment” with the students in Erdene Zuu monastery located in the Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape.

Teachers of School No. 2 teach students how to relate to nature properly by making them understand the consequences of human wrongdoings, and to attend worship ceremonies of local sacred mountains.

One of the significant activities related to environmental education was the “Training Workshop for School Teachers on World Heritage Education (WHE) for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)” conducted in Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape in June 2007. The workshop sought to promote a better understanding about WHE and ESD and share information and experiences on nature conservation, tradition, Buddhism and globalization. It also intended to collect successful innovative ideas and experiences that can be applied in the school curricula and extracurricular activities.

At the workshop, teachers from different provinces of Mongolia participated to share their experiences and to learn from each other. The participants undertook a field study visit to various outstanding monuments and sacred sites located in Orkhon Valley World Heritage Site to discover the current state of the sites and to learn how these are maintained and conserved. Teachers also visited ASPnet School No. 2 in Kharkhorin soum to share and learn about the school’s successful experiences in conducting activities on WHE and ESD, and in integrating the sacred sites concept into environmental conservation.

During the workshop, it was mentioned that modern methods for nature preservation should be connected with traditional methods. Worshipping mountains was cited as an example of a traditional method for nature preservation. As a result of the workshop, teacher trainers and teachers developed their own teaching plans.

Furthermore, many child participatory and children’s self-

administrative organizations have their own environment-friendly and nature-sensitive educational activities, such as student councils at the grassroots level; children's council at the aimag level; young naturalists' club at schools, children organizations and Tsokh children's newsletters.

These groups organize nature protection programs once or twice every year. The Zalgamjlagch (successor) Association is one such children's organization, with groups in 21 aimags throughout Mongolia.

The objectives of the organization are as follows:

- To train young leaders who are conscious and committed to respect the value of life and love their Motherland and Mother Earth; and
- To develop a moral culture among the youth.

In this modern era dominated by technology and science, human beings desire more material wealth and comfort than ever before. However, this has had an impact on ethical norms and moral values, and raises many concerns about its negative effect on society.

Therefore, the Zalgamjlagch Association is committed to restoring ethical and moral values in society. In particular, the young generation who will build the future must be provided with good education and leadership qualities so that they can contribute to the prosperity of their country and the world. In this respect, everyone should make an effort to pursue these common goals.

The main activities of this child participatory organization include:

- 1) Education: lectures and trainings focused on civil education issues, such as moral values and ethics, love for the Motherland and nature.
- 2) Helping others: self-development by acquiring knowledge and skills, as well as helping others while teaching.
- 3) Building friendships: various sports activities, cultural events, entertainment and adventure programs will build strong bonds



of friendship.

- 4) Discovering the Motherland: helping Mongolian citizens prepare themselves by studying Mongolian history, cultures and traditions, coupled with visits to beautiful natural and cultural sites.
- 5) International cultural exchange programs: knowledge of foreign languages and different cultures which would develop skills of young leaders, and widen their view of the world.

Aside from these activities, the association also organizes an nationwide essay-writing competition on the theme “I love my Motherland.” It also publishes an anthology of books, “We - Holder of the Future,” which includes a selection of the best essays. It also conducts an annual seminar about love for the country among 11th grade students, with the aim of instilling good educational and moral values.

Renowned actor Mr. Tserendagva and actress Ms. Mendbayar participated in a discussion with children on the topic of love for the country, during a seminar held on 19 March 2006.

At the same seminar, Mr. Ganbaatar, leader of Enthusiastic Reform movement, presented a lecture on traditions and customs. Other famous art and cultural figures performed songs and music about the Motherland and nature, and shared their opinions with children.

#### 4.3. Summary Results of Questionnaire

One of the primary objectives of the survey is to identify the extent to which nature protection traditions are kept and practiced; attitudes and thoughts of local people towards these traditions; and the present status of environmental education provided.

Fifty residents from the Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape - World Heritage Site answered the survey questionnaires.

Among the total respondents:

50% were school children (14-18 years old).

35% were school teachers (20-60 years old).

15% were local residents (different ages).

Teachers and students were involved in the survey. These schools provide education according to the program and curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The schools are as follows:

#### *Kharkhorin soum*

- Orkhon complex school
- General education school No.1
- General education school No.2

#### *Khujirt soum*

- General education school

#### *Bat-Ulziit soum*

- General education school

#### *Khotont soum*

- General education school

#### *Khashaat soum*

- General education school

The children involved in the survey are from soum schools located in Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape. Most children are from secondary schools, while a few students are from primary schools. Also teachers of the schools answered the questionnaire and were interviewed as well. Local residents and herders living around the mountains were also involved in the survey.

Some of the results of the questionnaire are as follows:

**1. How often do you participate in worshipping ceremonies of sacred sites?**

Always

21 persons

|           |            |
|-----------|------------|
| Sometimes | 19 persons |
| Never     | 10 persons |

**2. Do you think it is important to worship natural sites, such as mountains and rivers?**

|               |            |
|---------------|------------|
| Important     | 40 persons |
| Not important | 4 persons  |
| Don't know    | 6 persons  |

**3. Why do you think people worship mountains and rivers as “sacred”?**

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| For more rains                                      | 23 persons |
| For blessings from the gods of mountains and rivers | 17 persons |
| To preserve traditional customs                     | 6 persons  |
| To protect nature                                   | 4 persons  |

**4. Do you know any restrictions imposed near the sacred sites?**

|             |            |
|-------------|------------|
| Do know     | 33 persons |
| Know little | 11 persons |
| Don't know  | 6 persons  |

**5. What subjects teach nature protection at school?**

1. Mongolian history
2. Mongolian geography
3. Civic education
4. Project work class

**6. What kind of extracurricular activities are organized for nature protection traditions?**

Since this was an open question, school teachers and children provided different answers as mentioned below. Some answers to the

questionnaire are taken from interviews. There are many extra-curricular activities, such as essay-writing competitions, painting contests, tree planting, garbage clean-up, field trips, and camping tours, that are all dedicated to ecology education, cognitive development and nature protection.

### **7. What kind of community-based activities involve nature protection traditions and rituals?**

Every year, teachers and students participate in worshipping ceremonies and rituals at sacred places. To a certain extent, it can be concluded that such ceremonies provide environmental education to children and local residents.

Based on the results of the survey and interviews, information on worshipping rituals for sacred sites is transmitted from one generation to the next. Parents pass on the information to their children, while siblings teach their younger brothers and sisters. It is essential for the young generation to learn about nature protection traditions, as they embrace modern concepts and ideas.

Most of the school children, who answered the survey questionnaires, said they accompanied their parents to worshipping ceremonies. Boys ride race horses during the ceremonies. Girls learn from their mothers and grandmothers how to make offerings to nature. Every morning, they wish for luck as they offer the first drops of tea for the local sacred sites.

## **5. Conclusion**

The sacred sites concept is familiar with regard to environmental education in Mongolia. While the main concept of environmental preservation and protection is taught in schools, there are no specific activities inside and outside the classroom.

There are many types of activities, aimed at protecting the

environment and cultural traditions carried out at local schools. These activities have been enhanced since the inclusion of Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape into the World Heritage list. However, it should be noted these activities are not organized well enough. The results of the study indicate that there is a need for better management and more participation from schools. During the discussions, it was identified that environmental education is provided for the youth and children in schools. Several activities such as essay-writing and drawing competitions, tree planting and environment clean-up are organized among students. However, good results from these activities have yet to be seen, since students have not acquired enough skills to practice these in daily life.

Therefore, this situation calls for merging the existing educational extracurricular programs and activities aimed at environment preservation and protection. The state should consider organizing more systematic activities, as well as integrating environmental education with the concept of sacred sites.

In conclusion, the government, educational policy makers and local authorities should make it a priority to integrate the sacred sites concept into environmental education in order to boost nature conservation efforts. There should also be more activities to raise awareness about the conservation of ecological and cultural diversity, and environmental protection.

## 6. Implications and Recommendations

Environmental protection and conservation activities are provided through various extracurricular activities, but there are rather limited information and activities on the promotion of the sacred sites concept for ecological education. Some examples of religious ceremonies and environment protection traditions can be promoted along with the worshipping rituals of sacred sites.

Despite this, there is an obvious need for expanding and enriching activities that raise awareness and deliver knowledge about traditional worship customs that protect nature, and other traditions that instill respect for nature.

Linking past traditions with the explanations on the modern environment protection methods will greatly enhance the quality of teaching. For example, speaking about the custom of worshipping the local mountain and hill spirits, cleaning the areas around the ovoo (a pile of stones marking the mountain top) from debris can be explained in connection with environment preservation and reforestation plans.

Art classes in school are a good example of how to give students a different view on environmental conservation. The art-related school activities include drawing natural scenery and historical monuments, essay-writing and painting competitions.

Also seeing the classical and national arts and organizing painting contests about the local scenic places and monuments, as well as other types of extracurricular activities are very important for providing a good understanding of the concept of environmental conservation.

Folk songs, music and art classes are very important in developing a sense of aesthetics among students. Visits to natural sites and attending worship ceremonies of sacred sites also help students understand the necessity of protecting and loving nature.

Based on answers from the questionnaires and interviews, various extracurricular activities to help make environmental education more entertaining and interesting were identified. Among these activities are:

- Visits to sacred sites and attend worship ceremonies;
- Practical activities on environment protection and conservation such as planting trees, cleaning garbage, etc.;
- Theatrical plays and performances about nature, traditions and customs;

- Essay-writing, painting, song and poetry competitions;
- Dissemination of information and promotional products;
- Preparation of posters, small books and brochures, and school newspapers;
- Crossword puzzles about the environment;
- Worshipping sacred springs and rivers; and
- Lessons on legends and stories about the tradition of sacred sites from the elders in the area

## References

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2. O. Sukhbaatar, "Sutra of Mongolian Sacred Mountains and Waters", Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia 2001
3. "Presentations from the Northern Buddhist Conference on Ecology and Development", Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia 2004
4. N. Urtnasan, A. Duurenjargal, "Sacred Sites in Mongolia and Biodiversity Conservation", Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia 2007



## Appendix

### Questionnaire

1. Name .....
2. Age .....
3. Place of residence .....
4. Present occupation / school .....
5. How often do you participate in worshipping ceremonies of sacred sites?
  1. Always
  2. Sometimes
  3. Never
6. Do you think it is important to worship natural sites such as mountains and rivers?
  1. Important
  2. Not important
  3. Don't know
7. Why do you think people worship mountains and rivers as 'sacred'?
  1. For more rains
  2. For blessings from the gods of the mountains and rivers
  3. To preserve traditional customs
  4. To protect nature
8. Do you know restrictions imposed near the sacred sites?
  1. Yes
  2. I know a little
  3. No

**9. What kind of subjects teach nature protection at school?**

1. Mongolian history
2. Mongolian geography
3. Civic education
4. Project work class
5. Others .....

**10. What kind of extracurricular activities are organized for nature protection traditions?**

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**11. What kind of community-based activities are held with regard to nature protection traditions and rituals?**

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# Field Visit

On behalf of APCEIU, Ms. Ma. Johanna Encabo, Junior Programme Specialist, Research and Development Team undertook a field visit to Mongolia from 30 June to 5 July, 2008 to carry out the following missions such as: 1) to confer the EIU Best Case Studies Award on the researcher, 2) to provide the guidelines on finalizing the case study report; and 3) to interview teachers, headmasters, scholars and students involved in the research and encourage them to continue and enhance further activities related to EIU.



▲ Confering the award on the researcher



▲ Discussing the guidelines with the researcher and staff from Mongolian National Commission for UNESCO



▲ Meeting with Mr. Norov Urtnasan, Secretary-General, Mongolian National Commission for UNESCO



◀ Interview with the head monk  
at Erdene Zuu Monastery



◀ Interview with the Executive  
Director and teacher at  
Kharakhorum University



◀ The researcher offering food to  
the mountain and praying for a  
safe travel

