

### A Journey to Mongolia – Exploring Opportunities for Forest Research Collaboration

*By Alexander Buck, Deputy Executive Director of IUFRO, and Risto Seppälä, Immediate Past President of IUFRO*

The group of tourists exploring Terelj National Park some eighty kilometers from the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar on horseback is impressed by the beauty of the country and the vastness of the steppe. However, these are no regular tourists on an adventure trip to an exciting country but international forest scientists with a particular interest in Mongolian ecosystems and forest-related research activities. They are here on the invitation of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and the National University of Mongolia and are members of the IUFRO Enlarged Board.



Photo by A. Buck

Mongolia is both the second-largest landlocked country in the world and one of the least densely populated countries. Forests cover only about 10 million hectares, or about 7 percent of the total land area, but, as explains Dr. Jamsran Tsogtbaatar, Director of the Institute of Geoecology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, they provide essential environmental protection functions, prevent or mitigate soil erosion and serve as important windbreaks in the fight against desertification. They also protect watersheds and serve as unique wildlife habitats. In previous years, extreme weather events, extensive forest fires and major insect outbreaks caused severe damage to the forests and served as important reminders of how easily the fragile ecosystems of Mongolia can be affected by climatic changes, for example. Thus, forest-related research activities in Mongolia need to focus strongly on maintaining the ecological balance and protecting and rehabilitating natural resources.

Two organizations carry out most research related to forests and trees in Mongolia: the Institute of Geoecology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, and the Department of Forestry of the Faculty of Biology at the National University of Mongolia. They both have a strong interest in international collaboration and the development of joint research projects and activities and this is why they decided to become members of IUFRO in 2006. As a third member, the Green Gobi Center N.G.O. joined IUFRO in spring 2007.

In a presentation to the IUFRO Board members, Professor Nachim Baatarbileg, Head of the Department of Forestry, outlined the possible fields of collaboration with other IUFRO members and scientists:

- joint research projects
- curriculum development of the Forestry Department
- guidance on high-quality scientific literature and publications that could be translated into Mongolian language for use as study material
- guest professors and lecturers, as well as exchanges of Master's and PhD students
- scientists' training and support for participation in IUFRO meetings and training courses

Some concrete ideas for cooperation were discussed with the Mongolian IUFRO Members, including restoration ecology, fast growing tree species and biotechnology. Dr. Tsogtbaatar highlighted the serious degradation of forest ecosystems in Mongolia and the associated loss of wildlife, and encouraged strong cooperation in this area.

Both the Institute of Geoecology and the Department of Forestry expressed their interest in hosting IUFRO-sponsored scientific meetings and conferences. Furthermore, the Faculty of Biology maintains four ecological training and research field stations which offer exciting opportunities for field research and study visits. If you would like to learn more about collaboration possibilities with IUFRO Members in Mongolia, please contact:

*IUFRO Secretariat (office(at)iufro.org;  
Dr. Tsogtbaatar (tsogtbaatarj (at) magicnet.mn);  
Professor Baatarbileg  
(Baatarbileg(at)biology.num.edu.mn).*