

Encyclopedia of Animals and Humans

The Tsaatan Reindeer Herders of Mongolia:  
*Forgotten lessons of human-animal systems*  
by

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For millennia, humans have depended on animals for resources necessary for survival. Through domestication, man has sought to ensure these resources by creating systems that bring humans and animals together into arrangements of coexistence. In the developed world as social, economic, and environmental factors have grown increasingly complex, systems of domestication have often tended towards mass production, resulting in pollution, cruelty, and imbalance. Few models remain that remind us how humans can utilize animals for resources while still maintaining balance, respect, and sustainability in the face of an ever-changing world.

In a remote corner of Central Asia, one community is struggling to do just that. The *Tsaatan* people of northern Mongolia are a nomadic people who depend on reindeer for nearly all aspects of survival, as well as cultural, spiritual, linguistic, and economic identity. Originating from the Sayan mountain region in Russian Siberia and Mongolia's northern-most province of Hovsgol, the Tsaatan, or ethnic *Dukha* people, are credited as one of the world's earliest domesticators of any animal. Written records by a traveling Chinese monk in 499 A.D., and 3,000 year old stone carvings of reindeer in the area, are evidence of the Tsaatan's ancient relationship with their reindeer (Donahoe 2003 & Vitebsky 2005). For generations, the group practiced nomadic reindeer husbandry throughout the Sayan region, until border closures in the 1920s restricted their movements to within Mongolia. Now isolated from their ancestors and other reindeer herding peoples of the region such as the Evenki, Tofa, Tozhu, and Soyots, the Tsaatan reside between 51 and 52 degrees north latitude, and are Mongolia's only reindeer herders (Jernsletten & Klokov, 2002). Today just over 200 Tsaatan individuals live in the Mongolian taiga, an ecosystem characterized by larch trees, high moisture, and sub-arctic conditions. They move regularly within two main camp areas, referred to as *Barone* (West) and *Zuun* (East) Taiga respectively, seeking pasture for their deer. Tsaatan maintain small herds of between 7 and 160 reindeer per family, utilizing the domesticated deer (*Rangifer tarandus*) for renewable resources, and imbuing them with value as essential members of the community.

Reindeer are milked daily, providing the staple component of the Tsaatan diet largely consisting of reindeer dairy products. Naturally shed antlers are used to carve tools, and make handicrafts that are sold to tourists, a recent but increasingly significant shadow economy for the community. Nutrient-rich velvet antler is periodically harvested in early summer for international medicinal markets, but the practice is declining due to controversy over cutting the still-living structures (Haigh & Keay, 2006).

Perhaps the most significant use of deer in the Tsaatan system is for transport. Reindeer are ridden and used as pack animals during nomadic moves that occur every 2-10 weeks. They are an essential mode of transportation in the high mountain, road-less taiga. A single reindeer can accommodate up to 65 kilos of weight, consisting of household items, personal belongings, and of course riders (Donahoe, 2003). Sometimes logs used in the construction of the Tsaatan's tipi

dwellings, or *ortz*, will also be loaded in order to transport them from one camp to the next if wood sources are scarce. The docile animals are ridden by young and old alike, and are often used to travel 30 kilometers or more in a single day (Keay, 2002).

Unlike many reindeer-herding peoples in the circumpolar region of the world such as the Evenki of Siberia or Saami of Scandinavia, meat harvest is not a predominant feature in the Tsaatan system (Donahoe 2003 & Vitebsky 2005). Deer are more valuable as transport animals and milk providers rather than a source of meat. In fact, the community's ancient tradition of shamanism largely precludes the slaughter of reindeer by placing sacred value on the animals. Instead, hunting wild game such as elk, moose, bear, sable, and boar have historically provided a consistent protein source.

In exchange for renewable resources and reliable transportation the Tsaatan select optimal pasture for the herds, provide protection from predators, and offer their reindeer salt treats. In essence, both humans and animals are linked through a system of interdependence that enables both to survive in the harsh landscape of the northern taiga. Without the Tsaatan, reindeer would be at the mercy of wolves, left to compete against wild caribou for resources, with natural selection inevitably taking its toll. As for the Tsaatan, one herder succinctly stated: "If our reindeer die, we die. They are not just our living but our life," (Sanjim, 2002)\*. This unique relationship is apparent in daily life and is chronicled in multiple Tsaatan tales of origin, for example:

*A poor woman in ancient times was wandering in the mountains without any animals. She came upon a deer and was careful not to disturb it. For three days she returned to the same spot and found the deer waiting curiously for her. On the third day, there were two deer, and she called to them, "Goo goo goo," and said, "If you come home with me, we can take care of each other. I will protect you from wolves and give you salt to eat, and you can give my people food and a way to travel." The deer followed the woman home, and as it was fall, the deer mated, and the first reindeer was soon born. (Erdenshimik, 2002)\*\**

This story illustrates reciprocity and reverence uncommon to most human-animal systems in the developed world. In the Tsaatan model, people's very identity and origin is linked with that of reindeer. This fosters an unspoken commitment to the animals, making mistreatment and disrespect of reindeer a cultural taboo. Even children are expected to uphold these standards, learned through stories, songs, and living examples. As adults, Tsaatan people express a kind of gratitude and appreciation for reindeer that might seem trite or out of place in a western model of domestication. But in the Tsaatan community, reindeer evoke an ethical responsibility characterized by respect and reverence. This is indicated by the tradition of having a shaman in the community identify one sacred, or protected reindeer per family that is permitted to wander freely much like a member of the family. Cultural beliefs such as this offer guidelines for maintaining balance, sustainability, and respect between humans and animals, particularly in the face of change.

At present, the Tsaatan system of reindeer husbandry is in a state of transition, challenged by modernity, development, and an ongoing period of rapid change. Forced relocation, slaughters of

the herd, and upheavals of the Tsaatan's socio-economic situation during Mongolia's socialist era (1921-1991) placed pressure on herders to radically alter or abandon their lifestyle. The political transition in 1991 from socialism to a free-market democracy further affected the community, creating a novel environment in which to adapt. In recent decades, many families have tended towards other pursuits, leaving the reduced number of herders in the taiga in a position to face challenges never before encountered.

Today, strict hunting laws and expensive permits along with mounting concerns over wildlife populations have made hunting costly and controversial resulting in an unfamiliar dependence on reindeer as a meat source. Traditional knowledge such as the use of herbs for treatment of wounds and ailments has been forgotten or is no longer considered relevant. The emergence of tourism and mixed-use of the taiga (i.e., mineral exploration and non-subsistence hunting by various individuals) has escalated traffic and influence within the community, and a growing need for cash in order to secure relatively new commodities such as antibiotics, flour, school supplies, and two-way radios all threaten the lifestyle of the Tsaatan.

As a result, change and adaptation are constant forces in the community. In response to changing food needs, herders are beginning to adjust management and breeding strategies of their animals in order to provide a sustainable meat source while still honoring ancient values associated with the use of reindeer. Elders have begun to revitalize traditional healing techniques, while the incorporation of modern pharmaceuticals has supplemented changing health needs. New activity and outside visitors to the taiga are often perceived as welcomed opportunities, and herders have begun to pursue shadow economic activities that offer cash income, while continuing to herd reindeer.

Some new factors however, have created complex scenarios of conflicting interest that seem like road blocks to the Tsaatan's ultimate survival. One example is the face-off between nomadism and sedentarism, each offering distinct benefits to the community. Herders' desire to access schools, town centers, outside visitors, and economic opportunities outside the taiga has stimulated some families to settle in semi-permanent camps close to the *ecotone*, or ecosystem edge, between taiga and steppe biomes. While the socio-economic benefits of this trend are apparent, the lack of movement and removal from the reindeer's natural taiga habitat disallows for proper forage access, thereby compromising the nutrition and health of the herds. Furthermore, exposure to livestock in settled areas increases the risk of disease for reindeer, a reality that may be responsible for the epidemic proportions of Brucellosis and other ailments affecting the reindeer and people of the community. Finding solutions to dilemmas such as this are indeed complex endeavors.

Understandably, it is daunting for the Tsaatan to develop approaches that sustain reindeer husbandry and fulfill new economic and social needs. The extent of change and development seems to undermine the very fundamentals of the community, leaving the culture's eventual extinction a threatening possibility. In fact, few societies in the world have managed to maintain the integrity of subsistence-based human-animal systems in the face of development and modernity. But for the Tsaatan, cultural values and traditional practices continue to be informants of daily choices and visions of the future. The Tsaatan identify as reindeer herders above all else, frequently asserting that reindeer are still the most valuable of all possessions and are the central feature of life. Reciprocity, respect, and sustainability remain core values, as does the desire to maintain balance in the face of adaptation, modernity, and development. Such

statements might echo latent sentiments felt by western cattle ranchers for example, but for the Tsaatan these words are enduring and motivating realities. This has likely played a role in helping make the Tsaatan people among the last remaining animal-dependent and predominantly subsistence peoples in the world, and it may be the critical element needed to achieve balance in human-animal systems. Perhaps our own society can take a lesson from this in order to reconsider systems of domestication as opportunities to foster productivity, sustainability, and compassion simultaneously.

#### Suggested Reading:

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\*Interview with Sanjim, male Tsaatan elder. Conducted by Morgan Keay. Spring 2002.

\*\*Interview with Erdenshimik, female Tsaatan herder. Conducted by Morgan Keay. Spring 2002.