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Managing Growth and Sustainable Tourism Governance in Asia and the Pacific

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KOREA
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Managing Growth and Sustainable Tourism Governance in Asia and the Pacific

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Case 8

Self-organizing governance of the Golden Eagle Festival, Mongolia

Summary

This paper examines a self-organizing governance approach to local sustainable development. It focuses on the case of the Golden Eagle Festival in Mongolia. This festival has been successful for 16 years in preserving traditional values and identity of eagle hunters while bringing economic benefits to the local community. The paper traces how a local initiative of self-organizing governance was born and evolved to achieve this success without financial and institutional support from Government.

Key words

- Self-organizing governance
- The Golden Eagle Festival
- Sustainable tourism

Key message

A local self-organizing governance initiative can be an alternative approach for sustainable tourism development in situations where there is minimal or no financial and institutional support from Government. Cultivating the capacity of local stakeholders for self-organizing governance and ensuring a broad local participation in the initiative, are critical conditions for sustainable tourism development.

C8.1 Introduction

Mongolia is traditionally a land of nomads, and among the most sparsely populated countries with only approximately 3 million people living in an area of 1,560,000 km².¹ Despite increasing urbanization over the past few decades, 50% of the population now resides in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, although an estimated 25–40% of its population is classified as nomads or semi-nomads.

The country has experienced a dramatic increase in international tourists from 71,000 in 1996 to 393,000 in 2014.² The Mongolian Government in 2013 promoted tourism using the tag lines: “Go Nomadic, Experience Mongolia” and in 2014, “Mongolia – Nomadic by Nature”. Tourists are attracted to Mongolia to observe nomadic life styles and cultures, experience activities such as horse and camel riding, archery, trekking, and eagle-hunting, and living and eating in a Ger, a traditional Mongolian house.³ Like many Asia Pacific countries, the Mongolian Government faces challenges in developing tourism: lack of funding and trained human resources, under-developed

1 Wikipedia (n.d), *List of countries and territories by population density* (online), available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org> (09-05-2017)

2 World Tourism Organization (2015), *Tourism Highlight*, UNWTO, Madrid (online), available at: www.unwto.org (21-04-2017).

3 Damba, G. (2016), *Treading on Tourism and Travel Experience along the Silk Road of United Nations World Tourism Organization: Book for Silk Road Conference on Nomadic Tourism and Sustainable Cities*, Admon Printing, Ulaanbaatar, pp. 21–22.

tourism infrastructure, and a weak supporting industrial structure.⁴ The local government does not have capacity to lead and organize tourism.⁵

This chapter discusses how a nomad community developed the Golden Eagle Festival and related tourism activities bringing economic benefits to the local economy while preserving traditional values and identity. The annual Golden Eagle Festival, organized by local eagle hunters, officially began in the city of Ulgii, Byang-Ulgii Province, Mongolia in 2000. It is held with minimal institutional and no government financial support. This initiative has evolved into a governance network of local associations, suppliers, and the community at large, including the local government and outside private players.

C8.2 The Golden Eagle Festival

The province of Bayan-Ulgii is located in the far west of Mongolia, 1,760 km away from the capital Ulaanbaatar. Travel from Ulaanbaatar by interregional express bus takes 48 hours. The daily flight from Ulaanbaatar to the Ulgii Airport can carry less than 50 passengers, takes three and half hours, and is inconvenient, as it stops at other airports on the way.

There are 93,000 residents in Bayan-Ulgii Province (93% ethnic Kazakh) in 2009. The province is composed of a capital city (Ulgii), 13 *soms* (counties), with 13 *som centers* (towns). With the exception of Ulgii, which has a population of 28,448, the other som centers are small towns with few community facilities that average a population of around 1,300.⁶ Most land transportation moves on roads that are mostly unpaved. However, the interactions between the capital city and som centers have strengthened in recent years as lifestyles are shifting from nomadic to semi-nomadic ones. Rather than living a wandering life, nomads are being gradually located at som centers.

There are no specific laws regulating eagle hunting, although relevant laws include the Law on Hunting (enacted in 1995, revised in 2000) and the Law on Environmental Protection (enacted in 1995, revised in 2008). These regulate hunting quotas, seasons, and methods including use of chemicals, smoking of dens, and cars to chase animals. There are no legal restrictions on the use, sale, and capture of eagles.⁷

4 Sharpley, R. (2002), 'Tourism: A Vehicle for Development in Richard', in: Sharpley, R. and Telfer, D. (eds.), *Tourism and Development: Concepts and Issues*, Channel View Publications, Sydney, pp. 11–34.

5 Kim, Y. and Scott, N. (2017), 'Network Dynamics of Tourism Development in South Korea', *Current Issues in Tourism* (online), available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14467885.2017.1345111> (21-04-2017).

6 Bayan-Ulgii Aimag Statistical Office (2010), *Annual Report 2009* (in Mongolian).

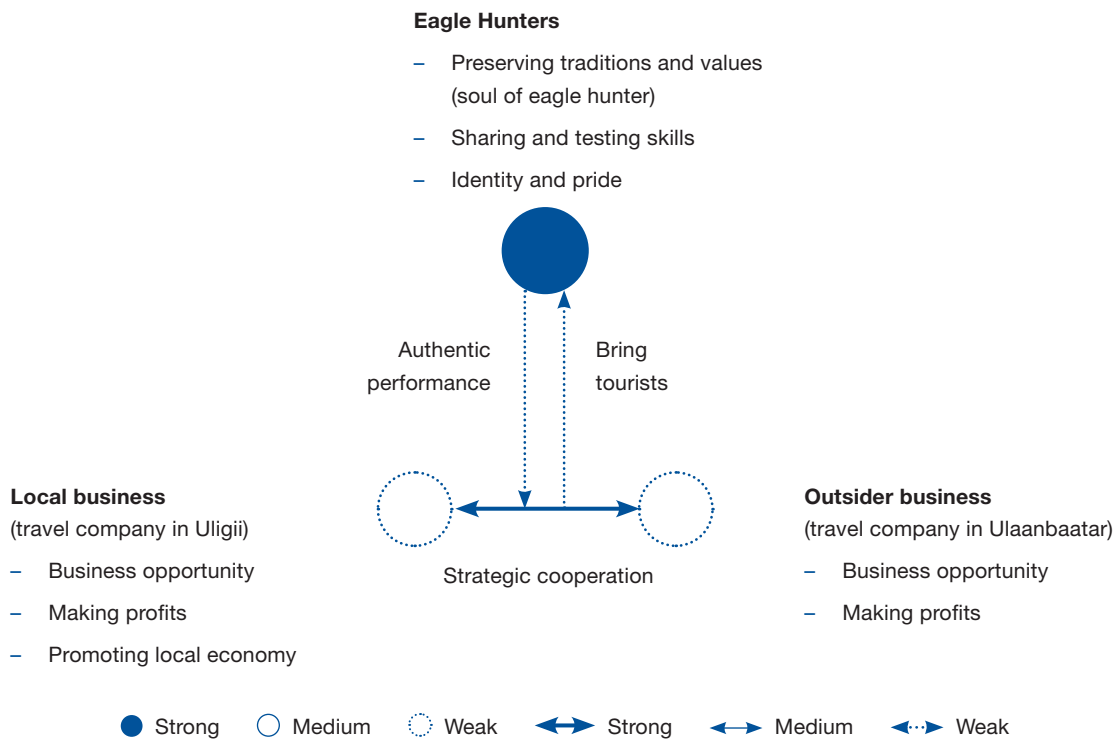
7 Ebner, N. (2016), 'When The Hunt Is Over: Culture and Conservation in Kazakh Eagle Falconry', *Independent Study Project (ISP)*, Collection 2508, p. 31 (online), available at: <http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/2508/10001> (21-04-2017).

C8.2.1 The Pre-Golden Eagle Festival Period (–1997)

Mongolia has harsh winter conditions often below –30° C. Hunting with golden eagles (falconry) is a traditional means of acquiring food and fur during the winter in Bayan-Ulgii province, and the tradition remains in a few areas. Bayan-Ulgii has 80% (around four hundred) of the world’s active eagle hunters. The hunts also often occur in teams, with sometimes as many as five falconers.⁸

In the early 1990s, international tourists to Mongolia were few in number. Some special interest tourists utilized private travel agencies (Altai Tour Co Ltd in Ulgii and the Nomadic Expedition Co Ltd in Ulaanbaatar) to visit Khomarkhan, a well-respected eagle hunter. Tourists were able to watch this old eagle hunter, dressed in traditional garments demonstrating the local customs with his eagle. In general, interactions between eagle hunters and private travel business sectors were loose and minimal at this point; hunters needed to cooperate in marketing because of the distance between Ulgii and Ulaanbaatar but this was difficult due to low demand (see figure C8.1).

Figure C8.1 Stakeholders, motivations, role and interaction in the period of pre-festival (–1997)



8 Soma, T. (2012), 'Contemporary Falconry in Altai-Kazakh in Western Mongolia', *The International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, volume 7, pp. 103–111.

C8.2.2 The emergence of the Golden eagle Festival (1998–2000)

In 1998, Altai Tours in Ulgii and Nomadic Expedition Company in Ulaanbaatar, began to actively organize the festival. These companies developed a partnership with the local falconers. After receiving permission for using land for the festival from the provincial authorities of Bayan-Ulgii, the Golden Eagle Festival was officially launched at Khal Tolgoi in Bogot Sum, which lies 18 km south-east of Ulgii.

The official Golden Eagle festival was held for the first time in Bugat, on the outskirts of Ulgii, in October 2000. Around 60 hunters from all over the province gathered for the festival, showing off their techniques and skills in catching typical prey such as foxes. The festival also included Kok-Bal (traditional wrestling on horseback), and an eagle recall contest, where the falconer waits at the bottom of a mountain for his or her eagle to be released. They then call the birds back and the event is scored for the time and efficiency of the eagle in finding her master.⁹ The festival retained its traditional focus on the performance of the hunters, but introduced competitions to catch prey such as foxes. This motivated the falconers to become more active participants and offered a good opportunity to show off and test their skills.

The private sector became a main stakeholder in this festival's success and provided financial support. The cooperation between two companies soon led to increasing demand from Ulaanbaatar and the international community. The importance of the companies and the interaction between these two were strongly tied. The role of the local community in running the festival was weak. Key local community stakeholders such as NGOs and the cultural sector were allowed to play only an insignificant role as their active engagement in the running of the festival was not perceived to be valuable by the festival organizers other than in an advisory capacity. The relationship between the local community and the initial stakeholders (the eagle hunters and the commercial private sector) was poor. The profits from the admission fees were distributed to the key stakeholders by the festival's organizing body, the Association of Mongolian Eagle Hunters. The Association of Mongolian Eagle Hunters was formed with the aim:

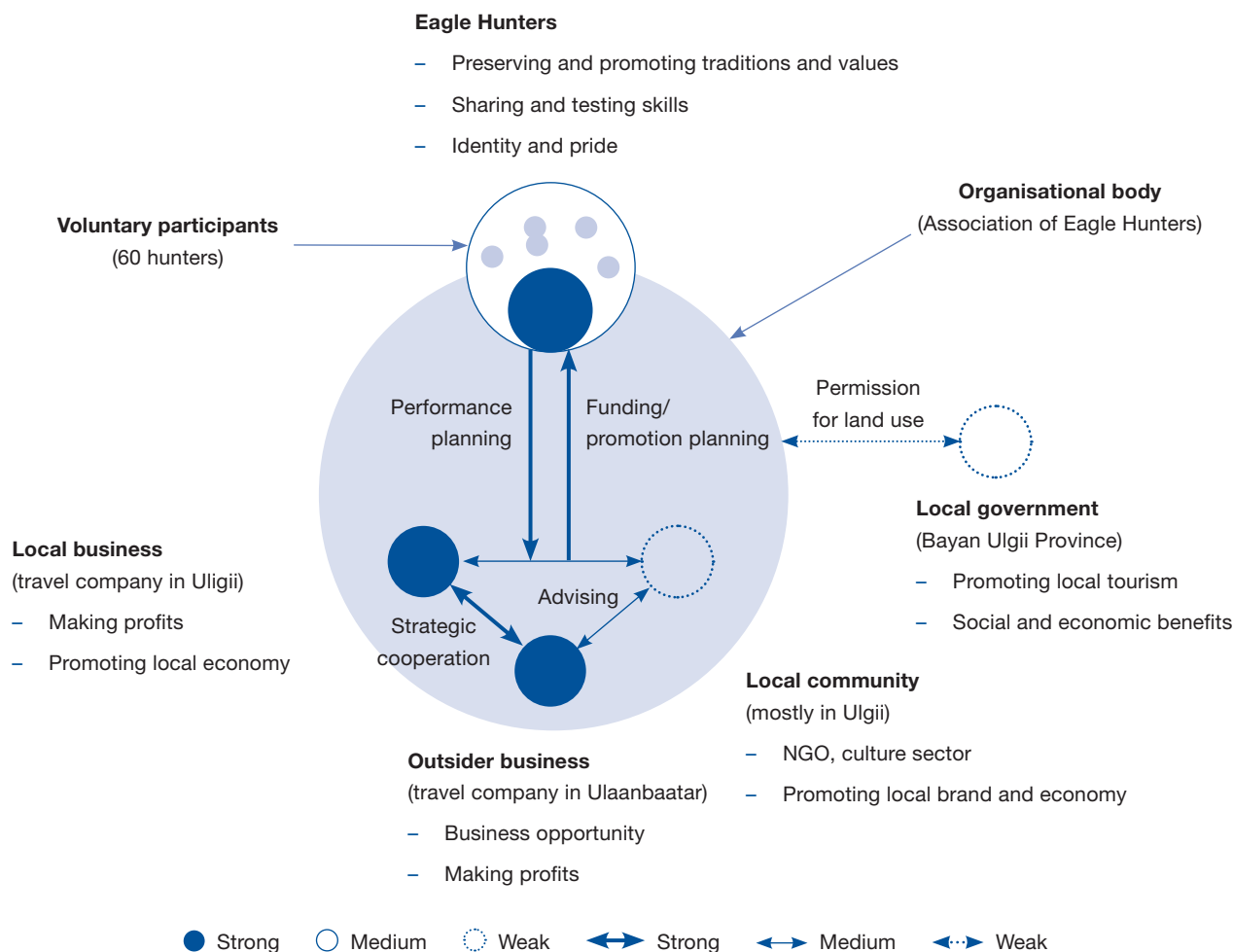
“To revitalize the tradition and custom of eagle hunting by the Altaic Kazakh minority group of Mongolia and to transmit the tradition to the next generation, to promote it to the nation as well as internationally to protect the interest of eagle hunters helping each other.”¹⁰

The provincial government played a minimal passive role providing permits for land use for the festival and had not yet recognized the importance of the social and economic benefits of the festival (see figure C8.2).

9 Soma, T. and Sukhee, B. (2014), 'Altai Kazakh falconry as heritage tourism: the Golden Eagle Festivals of Western Mongolia', *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, volume 9, pp. 135–147.

10 Ibid. p. 139.

Figure C8.2 Stakeholders, motivations, role and interaction in the period of the emergence, 1998–2000



C8.2.3 Self-organizing of the Golden Eagle Festival (2001–2016)

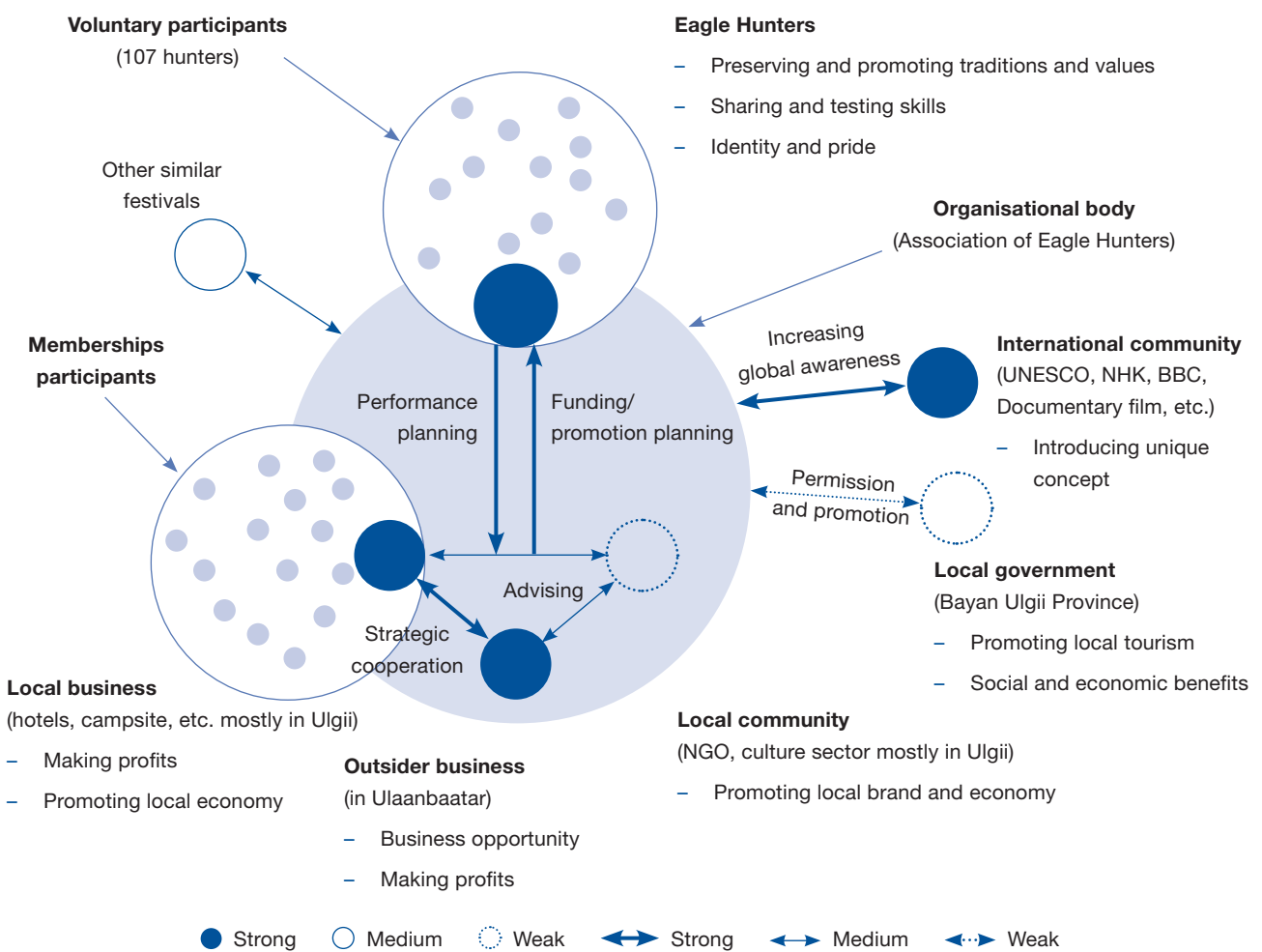
The number of participating eagle hunters increased from 60 in 2000 to 107 in 2016, including 9 international participants from Kazakhstan. More private stakeholders have become involved, mostly local businesses such as travel agencies, hotels, taxis, and camping sites in Ulgii. While the roles and interaction between eagle hunters and businesses are stable and strong, the local community is not yet a core stakeholder. This lack of collaboration means that the festival is not recognized as an event for the whole community.

The festival has received publicity from international broadcasting and media companies. Documentary films about the Golden Eagle festival have been televised by NHK on Japanese TV in 2010, and BBC's Human Planet in 2011. In addition, a documentary, "the Eagle Huntress" which was released in 2016 and directed by Otto Bell, was shortlisted for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature and also garnered a BAFTA Award nomination. UNESCO has designated the festival as part of the Representative List of the Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In 2015, it was awarded best event of the year by the Mongolian Ministry of Environment and Tourism. The festival has inspired the creation of other similar festivals held in other som. These, however, are

organized by the local travel sector. The Bayan-Ulgii provincial government has gradually begun to play a greater role in promoting the Golden Eagle festival and other similar events by providing an official tourism website since 2013, though the role of the Government is still quite limited to supporting the main organizers (see figure C8.3).

The Golden Eagle festival now attracts around 400 international tourists every year and has received significant international publicity. Indeed, the festival has become a significant festival for the Altai-Kazkhs peoples of Mongolia, and recognized internationally as a celebration of cultural heritage.

Figure C8.3 Stakeholders, motivations, role and interaction in the period of the evolution, 2001–2016



C8.3 Lessons learnt and ways forward

The Golden Eagle Festival for Altai-Kazakh falconers is perhaps similar to a family reunion or celebration, where they can show off their heritage and traditions, while also enhancing cultural identity and pride. For the local community, the festival has grown the local economy through involvement of local businesses. The increased awareness of the region also has a halo effect supporting other local growth. The festival has been organized and initiated with minimal institutional and financial support from the central and local governments.

Despite these positive effects, there are growing concerns that the original traditions of eagle hunting may be eroded as they are staged during the festival. Some reports have indicated an increase in selling and buying of eagles, rather than releasing them at the right time (after five years).¹¹ Some individuals pretend to be eagle hunters, but actually have no experience and are merely owners of eagles. The local community does not recognize it as a festival for residents, but rather as one designed simply for tourists and those stakeholders with direct involvement in the benefits derived from the festival.¹²

There are several lessons that can be derived from this case study that may apply to sustainable tourism in other developing countries. While central governments increasingly recognize the economic benefits of tourism, many of the programmes they have initiated aim to attract foreign investment, but can create isolated enclaves that cater to foreign tourists, and threaten local traditions and the natural environment. Tourism that is based on the richness of a country's culture, traditions and unique life styles and practices offers an alternative that may attract different types of international (and national tourists) allowing for a sustainable development of tourism that protects local cultures, traditions and environments.

Governments, however may lack the knowledge, commitment, and capacity to promote such activities. Moreover, governments may lack the trust of local communities and their representatives. This case highlights the importance of local initiatives and self-organizing ventures run by local stakeholders. The case study suggests that central governments can, however, play a positive role by providing incentives to support community-based initiatives, increasing the flexibility of the regulatory system to reduce bureaucratic burdens, and promoting full participation opportunities for the local community. The Government should, however, be vigilant in ensuring that non-local commercial interests do not take over such local initiatives. Government must ensure that local cultures and traditions as well as the natural environment are protected.

This case also sends a message to the stakeholders of the Golden Eagle Festival: the growing commercialism surrounding the festival may threaten the traditional values that were behind the festival as well as threaten the survival of the eagles themselves. It may also lead to the isolation of the festival from the community in which it is embedded. To ensure long-term sustainability of the festival and the nomadic community activities that surround it, broad local community participation must be ensured.

11 Soma, T. and Sukhee, B. (2014), 'Altai Kazakh falconry as heritage tourism: the Golden Eagle Festivals of Western Mongolia', *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, volume 9, pp. 135–147.

12 Ebner, N. (2016).