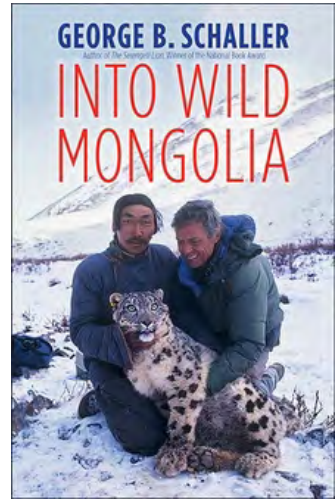


BOOK REVIEW

Into Wild Mongolia

George B. Schaller. 2020. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, USA. 210 pages (hard cover). \$28.00. ISBN 978-0-300-24617-9

This book was informative and entertaining, and presented an opportunity to learn many things about the ecology, wildlife, and people of Mongolia. George Schaller is well-known for his international exploits and expeditions, the majority of which have resulted in contributions to the professional literature in terms of scientific papers, books emphasizing the research conducted during those expeditions, and a number of contributions I would describe as ‘natural history and personal accounts’ based on those travels. *Into Wild Mongolia* clearly falls into the latter category.



The book consists of a lengthy introduction, followed by 8 chapters, among which are 4 in which Schaller discusses in detail his observations of, and his interactions or exploits with, wild camel (*Camelus bactrianus ferus*), golden bear (*Ursus arctos* ssp.), snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*), and Mongolian gazelle (*Procapra gutturosa*) during 16 trips to Mongolia from 1989 to 2007. In a separate chapter, he describes a 17th trip, in 2018, during which he renewed “acquaintances, [and noted] changes in the environment, wildlife, and culture”.

Three other chapters cover topics as diverse as foreign relations, hunting and its impacts on the fauna of Mongolia, and the current and future status of the Nomrog Strictly Protected Area, located in Mongolia’s great eastern steppe and one of Schaller’s favorite places. As of 2018, that vast area remained largely as when he first saw it in 1989, but with ominous changes portending. As described, it appears as though the eastern steppe is destined to suffer near irreparable damage, as did the Great Plains of North America during the 1930s, the result of egregious agricultural practices (Worster 1979). As were the southern plains prior to America’s dustbowl, and as noted by Schaller (p. 180), “The steppe is a gentle landscape without natural defenses against plow and plunder. Mongolia is blundering toward disaster. After plowing up its rangelands, neighboring Inner Mongolia has suffered from widespread desertification, erosion, and severe yellow dust storms...which engulf the region as a whole”. In addition to agricultural practices, energy development, transportation infrastructure, and other anthropogenic activities will further alter that once pristine area. Schaller ends the chapter with the realization that the Mongolians seem to have discarded in Nomrog—and elsewhere—any respect for the value of wildlife habitat, and asks (p. 154), “Will the Mongolians some day return to their basic traditional values of respect for the land?”.

I have always admired Schaller’s contributions to international conservation, as well as the intensity with which he has approached wildlife conservation. I also have a great deal of respect for his opinions, and much of that developed nearly 20 years ago during a

formal dinner party hosted by mutual friends. Nonetheless, there are portions of the book in which Schaller expresses views that I don't necessarily hold and, to my thinking, may be counter-productive in terms of generating support for wildlife conservation—and perhaps even more importantly the conservation of wildlife habitat in Mongolia. We both disdain the commercial harvest of wildlife, which is a serious problem throughout a country in which animals are killed indiscriminately and in huge numbers for 'medicinal' products, meat, and hides that are exported for profit, or are harvested in essentially unlimited numbers for subsistence. But he places seemingly legitimate hunters in the same category as those involved in unregulated killing, noting simply (p. 133) that, "[foreign] trophy hunters kill argali sheep, red deer, and others to decorate their private mortuaries". In the absence of any quantification, the impacts of those disparate harvest regimes will appear identical to the casual reader. Legal, tightly regulated hunting has the potential to contribute in meaningful ways to the conservation of wildlife in Mongolia. For meaningful benefits to accrue, however, it must be tied to a reduction in the potential for corruption, an increase in ecological sustainability, and must be linked more closely to local communities so that members feel involved and valued, their livelihoods are ensured, and local governments properly redirect revenue back to wildlife conservation (Siebert and Belsky 2002; Maroney 2005; Page 2015). Schaller closes out this chapter by discussing harvest rates among Mongolian gazelles that are killed by local hunters for subsistence and hides and as an unsustainable and illegal commercial enterprise; Siberian marmots (*Marmota sibiricus*) that are killed for meat, skins, and medicinal purposes for local use and export; and the illegal capture of Saker falcons (*Falco cherrug*) to be exported largely to Arab countries for sporting purposes (p. 142). The chapter ends quite bluntly with the statement (p. 145), "Damn the poachers... and damn the falconers who thoughtlessly were depleting a natural resource for their mere amusement".

All in all, *Into Wild Mongolia* is a worthwhile read. It calls to light some of the many issues facing wildlife and wildlife conservation in a country with vast natural resources, but that is faced with numerous challenges and opportunities. It will take only a few hours to read this book, as I found it difficult to not 'turn the page' to learn what followed. George Schaller has been a stellar advocate for wildlife conservation, this book is but another example of his efforts and dedication, and is written in plain language. Read it.

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