

GLEN FINAL REPORT

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BOOSTING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM
MONGOLIA, HUVSGUL AIMAG, MURUN
Huvsgul Association of Tourism & Information (HATI)

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SUMMARY

GLEN internship 2012 called „Boosting Tourism Business“ took place in a small local NGO Huvsgul Association of Tourism & Information (HATI) in Murun, Huvsgul Aimag, Northern Mongolia. GLEN tandem consisted of two participants, Marcela Janáčková from Czech Republic and Anna Befus from Germany. HATI is a host organization of the GLEN program since 2007, so the internship in 2012 was already the sixth of GLEN projects realized in HATI.

HATI was founded as a NGO in 2005 by Tseepil Gombojavin, who used to work at the Department of Tourism and Environment of regional government. The aim of HATI is to contribute to local tourism development by creating linkages and cooperation between different stakeholders participating in tourism business and sustainable tourism development in the region. Within this goal, HATI provides information and services through its Tourist Information Centre (TIC) to international independent tourists coming to Murun and links them to local tourism entrepreneurs. Moreover it aims to support and promote sustainable tourism and in the town and the region, among businesses and local organizations as well as at the regional government.

The GLEN volunteers's main task was to run the Tourist Information Centre on daily basis, to update information materials and to network with various stakeholders from tourism sector.

Huvsgul Aimag is well known especially for its natural wealth, the most famous Lake Huvsgul attracts tens of thousands of tourists each year. Murun is regional administrative capital located about 750 km north-west from Ulaanbaatar, functioning as the economic, logistic and cultural hearth of the region. This can be seen on fast development of the town.

REPORT

MONGOLIA TODAY

Nowadays Mongolia is one of the most dynamic economies in the world. The interest of international community to invest in Mongolia is mainly driven by its abundant natural resources, dominated by copper, coal, gold and oil. The development potential coming from mining is great, however challenges concerning poverty and social inequality, migration, environment protection and corruption remain. The experts are saying Mongolia is in on crossroad, it depends on government how it will catch this momentum.

TOURISM IN MONGOLIA AND HUVSGUL AIMAG

Tourism plays an increasingly important role in the development of Mongolia. Tourism potential of the country has recently been recognized by tourists as well as the government, who has set tourism development among its priorities. Mongolia offers unique nomadic lifestyle, Buddhist and shamanist traditions, unforgettable fishing and horse riding experience or “survival” experience for those want to surpass their own limits in Mongolian harsh climate.

Tourist guides recommend realizing your trip around Mongolia with a travel agency and they warn that travelling on your own is extremely difficult in Mongolia. However, based on our experience and the experience of tourists coming to Tourist Information Centre, we wouldn't say so. Mongolia is a safe country, requiring ordinary awareness of pickpockets in the capital and independent travelling is definitely possible, hence sometimes challenging, mainly in sense of transportation.

Huvsgul Aimag itself has become one of the most visited regions in the country. It is a mountainous region, with about one third of area covered by forests and number of rivers and mineral sources. The natural conditions of the region attract diverse tourist activities as horse riding, hiking, fishing, canoeing. In winter the Ice Festival on Huvsgul Lake takes place, in summer there are Ultra-Marathon and Tsaatan festival, which is linked to the culture of the smallest Mongolian ethnic living in the very north of Huvsgul Aimag. Tsaatans, the reindeer herders living their traditional life nomadic life in the taiga, bring curious tourists, researchers and filmmakers to the region.

The government is increasingly investing in regional infrastructure development (mainly to increase the accessibility of Huvsgul Lake). Current development brings opportunities as well as challenges to the region. Improved infrastructure and opened frontier on the north of the lake for third nationals will bring more tourists to the lake area and to the surrounding National Park. Also the number of seasonal ger camps offering accommodation mostly for Mongolian tourists is steadily rising. The majority of the camps on lake's coast are registered in Ulaanbaatar, making the profit coming back to the capital and not into the region itself, which bear the costs related to the functioning of the camps (e.g. waste management). The quantity of seasonal ger camps and independent campsites of Mongolian tourists challenges the sustainability of tourism industry on Huvsgul Lake.

HATI – THE HOST ORGANIZATION

HATI aims at contributing to sustainable tourism development in Murun and Huvsgul Aimag. HATI's founder, Tseepil Gombojav, had been working for Department of Tourism and Environment of Huvsgul Aimag administration for several years. From her experience she realized what kind of tourism services are missing and she founded the NGO, that's running a **Tourist Information Center (TIC)**.

The TIC is open during the tourist season, usually from June to September. To run the Tourist Information Centre during the summer is the main focus of GLEN internship. The TIC helps independent international tourists by providing information about the town and region, by organizing their trips and arranging contact with small local entrepreneurs working in tourism (drivers, guides, translators) in order to involve the local community in tourism business. Also the language courses for local people working in tourism are organized each year by European volunteers. The aim of English courses is to raise the qualification of local people working in tourism, where the knowledge of English represents an important comparative advantage, and to generate small income for HATI. The TIC also publishes and updates tourist information materials, conducts research on tourism infrastructure in the region, concerning accommodation and restaurants facilities or tourist services providers.

The organization cooperates with regional government and participates in discussions about tourism development of Murun and Huvsgul Aimag.

The work of TIC and therefore of HATI is seasonal. There are no official employees in the organization, it functions mostly on voluntary basis. The organization does not receive any regular funding from local or national administration. The regional government (Department of Tourism and Environment) supports TIC materially, by providing missing office equipment or with the premises for the office as in the year 2010 and probably this year. The only direct income comes from selling of tourist information materials, mainly maps and postcards, and by already mentioned English courses.

THE INTERNSHIP

Preparation

The communication with the host organization before our arrival was frequent, mainly due to the visa issue. From the experience of previous Glennies, we started to communicate the question of visa with Tseepil as soon as possible. For the stay in Mongolia the visa is needed for the EU citizens and for the stay longer than 2 months the invitation and the work permission are necessary. This procedure is considerably complicated and long-standing. The information we had about the process of obtaining work permissions was limited, hence we were surprised by administrative workload of the procedure of registration at Immigration Office and application for work permission at Labor and Welfare Agency. The organizational safeguard of HATI in this case was not sufficient, without the help of Mongolian friend living in Ulaanbaatar we would not be able to go through Mongolian bureaucracy. The need of support with this procedure and its planning must be clarified before the arrival of the interns.

The accommodation had been discussed in advance as well. The host organization took the responsibility of arranging the host family for us.

People in the organization

Our main contact person was the head of the organisation, Gombojav Tseepil, with whom we communicated in Russian language. Besides her, we cooperated with English-speaking Saraa Munkhbayar, who was helping Tseepil with the administration of our work permits and she was working together with us in TIC during first half of the internship. Saraa, as the local tourist guide, has a great knowledge of the local background and important contacts on different tourism service providers, so she helped us with orientation in the field.

Additionally we collaborated with Miga, an English teacher, who was supposed to work together with us in TIC, helping us in communication with locals. However, her English language skills and personal problems did not permit the meaningful collaboration. Sometimes we asked for help Enkhuushin Boldbaatar, who used to work as complimentary manager of TIC in 2009-10 and who is on maternity leave now.

Work in the organization

At the beginning of the internship the organizational meeting with Tseepil and Saraa was held, where we discussed Tseepil's plans and goals with HATI and possible activities during the internship. In general we had a free space to implement our own ideas and activities and we tried to do so in harmony with the goals of HATI.

We were working mostly independently and our tasks differed according to the season. In July and August the main focus was on providing information about Murun and Huvsgul Aimag to tourists (and first getting this information ourselves). We updated information materials about Murun and together with Saraa we were arranging border troop's permissions for tourists visiting the area close to Russian border, organizing transportation for them to Lake Huvsgul and further to the region or arranging horseback trips.

Since the end of August we started giving individual English classes for people working in tourism and we began to cooperate with other local NGOs like *World Vision* and *Bookbridge*. Together with *World Vision* we started to sell the handicrafts of local craftswomen in TIC. We participated in *Bookbridge's* English language competitions organized in local schools in order to promote English books and language.

After few weeks we organised a meeting with the representatives of local government and various institutions to present the work of HATI and challenges it faces. Since this meeting we were enjoying closer cooperation with local institutions and got supported by them in our activities. Together with workers of Department of Environment and Tourism of Huvsgul Aimag we create a new information brochure about Murun. With support of Department of Environment and Tourism we represented HATI and TIC on Huvsgul Aimag Tourism Meeting.

Our last activity since the beginning of school year was a small quantitative research about tourism in Murun. The research was done in cooperation with a group of students from *Dalai Van College*, where we presented our results in a form of workshop about sustainable tourism and intercultural issues.

Challenges we faced

Funds – HATI doesn't have any regular funding. Though the cooperation with local government, especially with the Department of Environment and Tourism of Huvsgul Aimag, exists, the administration provides occasional financial or material support for the TIC. The functioning of HATI is funded from private funds of the head of organization; the people working in HATI have been all volunteers. As Tseepil is busy with her job, she doesn't prioritize budget planning and applying for grant calls.

Office location – since its beginnings HATI faces constant change of location. As the NGO has no funds available, it cannot afford paying a rent and depends on the willingness of local government or individuals to

provide it with the space. At the end of our internship the TIC had to leave the spacious office located in front of the town's museum, which occupied since 2011. The owner of the house wanted to use the building for own purpose since the autumn 2012.

IT – we were missing the local IT-skilled person to (voluntarily) help us in case of difficulties with pc and support us with website design and its follow-up to ensure the sustainability of the site. With missing IT support and financial resources the website of TIC, the one of HATI's long-term goals, wasn't realized so far.

Communication – because of the language barrier we were facing in Mongolia, we relied every time on a Mongolian speaking person when discussing the work issues. First half of the stay Saraa helped us in TIC with communication with locals involved in tourism. However, Saraa had to leave for international NGO training in Japan and the second half of the internship we worked more independently, consulting our work and needs with Tseepil. Despite her busy work, she was flexible to come to the office when needed, however, she was not able to work with us continuously on certain projects, where Mongolian language and specific contacts and skills were needed, e.g. creation and placing of tourist information street signs in the town (the project created by Glennies 2009, which gained again attention and the promise of funding by Murun city administration in 2012).

Local volunteer – the ideal of local volunteer involved into daily work of TIC and working in "trinom" together with Glennies evolved from our experience, when the lack of language skills and local status hindered some of our plans from being realized.

Achievements

We provided information and assistance to around 280 tourists in the TIC. We helped many of them to organize their trips by arranging border permission, by reserving horse guides or even by helping to purchase the horse, by organizing public transportation, private driver or last minute flight. Some of them we provided with accommodation and several of them became our friends.

The cooperation between TIC and local government intensified this year, especially with the Department of Tourism and Environment of Huvsgul Aimag and the work of HATI is appreciated and supported by the administration. Hopefully, we pushed forward the question of funding and financial and material support of HATI by local government.

We tried to create a network of small entrepreneurs working in tourism, especially private drivers, and to create a linkage between them and tourists.

By selling the handicrafts of local craftswomen we gave opportunity to generate additional income to several local people. There is definitely big potential for networking with local NGOs.

We renewed the cooperation with Dalai Van College, which older Glennies started. The director of the school was interested in our work and willing to support our ideas of including their students in our research and organizing the workshop at school.

CONCLUSION

The GLEN cycle permitted me to reflect the internship as well as my personal development during one year. The internship itself was very enriching experience, in the sense of living and working in different culture without knowing the language, and also in terms of sharing three month experience in tandem. I highly appreciate the experience of living in a Mongolian household, keeping us in daily touch with local people, their daily routine and culture.

The work in Tourist Information Centre gave me valuable insight into completely new domain of sustainable tourism in Mongolia and its challenges. Despite the challenges HATI is facing, the internship in the organization has a potential, giving to volunteers a degree of freedom and responsibility at the same time.

As my GEAs, so far I realized two presentation evenings about Mongolia. Through the photos and stories I tried to bring Mongolia closer to general Czech public, to correct the misconceptions about the country people may have and to touch the issues of global interdependencies, development aid etc.

With similar aim I did two 1,5 hour GE workshops with school children aged 6-9 from my home town's school clubs. I wanted to show the children an intercultural view of the world, give them opportunity to personalize such a distant country as Mongolia and its culture by telling stories about people, their traditions and values and by showing pictures and Mongolian items.

A bigger common GEA with other Czech Glennies of 2012 is being prepared for summer 2013.