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Why Mongolians say sheep herders are lucky

B. Minzhigdorj & B. Erdenebaatar

Sheep, which form 60 percent of Mongolian livestock by number, are considered by Mongolian herders to be the most useful of the five species herded. This paper describes their multiple uses, including production of wool, skin, milk, meat, fat and dung.

This paper outlines the sheep utilisation system and its importance in Mongolia. The main emphasis is on the traditional way sheep products are used in rural areas; the paper highlights basic productive patterns of Mongolian sheep and possible ways to expand the utilisation of sheep as a multi-purpose animal.

Mongolians herd mainly native breeds of five livestock species on open natural pasture all year. The major fodder resource is natural pasture, estimated to be about 125 million square km, or about 5 hectares per head of livestock.

The type, productivity and nutrient value of natural pasture are highly dependent on ecological factors and vary in different geographical locations. Pasture yield is higher in the north of the country and the grass species are richer than in the southern part. However their nutritive quality is much lower. The productivity and nutrient content of pasture changes with the seasons; spring is the poorest time of year in terms of fodder availability.

Mongolian herders used to make not only large seasonal but also small local camp-changing movements in response to ecological changes and conditions and they have accumulated valuable herding skills and experience. Summer and autumn are the key moments for fattening and hardening livestock, while spring and winter are the time for careful management of herds in order to minimise body weight loss and thus reduce livestock mortality.

Forms of sheep utilisation

Mongolian sheep are distributed across all ecological zones, but about 60 percent are located in the forest-steppe and steppe zones. Mongolian sheep are multi-purpose animals utilised for their meat, wool, milk and skin.

Sheep even provide the essential part of the Mongolian herder's mobile hut. The Mongol *ger* is a convenient, hygienic and practical dwelling. The thick felt of a *ger* is made of sheep wool. Other products from sheep are used for the daily needs of rural people. So, Mongolians believe that a household which has a sheep flock is always lucky and happy because it has a warm *ger*, clothes, food and fuel. Consequently, Mongols prefer sheep among the principal *tavan khoshuul* (five kinds of livestock) due to their economic and other values. The sheep herd makes up about 60 percent of the total livestock population in Mongolia.

Wool and skin

Average wool yield is 1.0-1.4 kg in ewes and 1.6-2.0 kg in rams. 1 kg wool of Mongolian sheep is enough to make 0.6 m of carpet or 1 m of wool blanket (Tumurjav 1989). The wool of Mongolian sheep is a valuable raw material for making many household goods. Mongolian sheep are classified as semi-coarse and coarse wool-producing breeds. The skin is comparatively thick and easily processed and tanned.

Sheep wool is classified as either spring or autumn sheared and is used for different purposes. The main use of sheep wool is for felt making. A felt made of 100 percent sheep wool is called *tsagaan esgii* (white felt) and that produced by mixing a small portion of cattle or horse moult is *bor esgii* (light brown felt) (Sambuu 1957). The felt is used to make many items for everyday life. Mainly it is used to make *ger* covers, and covers for the *ger* skylight (*toono*). It is also used as a major

material for mattresses, floor covers and protective covers for baggage camels, saddle seats, tethers for young livestock and saddle horses. The protective and warm inside socks for Mongolian national boots are made of sheep wool. Sheep wool is a good raw material for high quality spinning. Industrially, sheep wool is processed into such products as wool blankets, carpets and many others.

Mongolian sheep skins are characterised by a dense structure due to adaptation to extreme climatic conditions. The skin of an adult Mongolian sheep is 113–117 square decimetres in area (Tumurjav 1989). Sheep and lamb skins are used to make warm fur clothes such as *ustei deel* (long overcoats with hair inside), winter caps, skin gloves, open gloves to protect the hands, overboots, soft and warm boots for small children, and skin bags to keep the legs warm at night. Use of sheep skin for overcoats depends on the length of the hair. Skin with long hair is suitable for everyday winter coats (*deel*) while the short hair ones are used for light overcoats.

Sheep skins damaged or not tanned properly are used for sacking and storing rice, flour and other dry goods such as dairy products and salt. Tanning sheep skins is considered mainly women's work; they usually decide how to process it and what it can be used for (Sambuu 1945). Traditionally sheep skin is used to make an outer blanket for a new-born small child due to its heat-keeping capability and softness. A warm bag made from sheep skin is very commonly used to keep and take lambs and kids born on the pasture to the main camp.

Milk

The annual milk yield of Mongolian sheep is 36–39 kg. Milk of Mongolian sheep contains high protein—6.48 percent—and fat—5.82 percent—levels (Indra 1983). The milking season of sheep in Mongolia is currently short and lasts only 45–60 days.

Sheep milk is used for human consumption in liquid form as well as processed dairy

products. Liquid sheep milk has high fat content and is considered a good ingredient for making milky tea (tea with milk and salt). It can be used to make various kinds of milk products: *urum* (cream), naturally separated milk butter, yoghurt, cheese, dried curd and low-alcohol vodka, among others (Indra 1983). Sheep milk is also drunk boiled. Mongolian herders prepare these products in the summer not only for immediate consumption but for later use in winter and spring.

Milking of ewes is organised in a very specific way. Two or three neighbouring households at some distance apart exchange ewes every day separated from their lambs, or keep the lambs separate from the main herd, in order to prevent the lambs suckling their mothers and exhausting the milk (Sambuu 1936, 1945). This method is known as *saakh soliltsokh* (exchanging milking ewes and goats). This is considered as one of the main forms of labour cooperation and reasons for camping close together in rural Mongolia. Keeping lambs separate from their mothers is mainly done by children so that they can get some basic experience of looking after livestock.

Meat

Mutton is the most highly valued meat in Mongolia. The quality of mutton is due to a range of factors, especially the capacity and food habits of sheep which graze different grasses selectively according to pasture composition and palatability. The sheep diet also includes a number of medicinal plants and thus makes mutton a meat of therapeutic value (Dash 1977). In Mongolia it is broadly accepted that mutton has recuperative powers. There is a tradition that a person who has had a lengthy treatment or mineral water cure, or a woman who has given birth is offered *shine shul* (fresh mutton) in order to contribute to a rapid recovery. New-born babies are washed in a thin soup made by boiling sheep bones (Aryasuren and Nyambu 1990).

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The fatty part of a sheep carcass, including the tail and back, is considered as a delicious and special gift. It is called *üüts shuus*. It is also offered at public ceremonies to special guests and old people as a symbol of the greatest respect. The *üüts shuus* is offered for the lunar New Year and age celebrations (Aryasuren and Nyambu 1990). City people often buy a sheep *üüts* at a higher price than that of a live sheep.

Sheep fat is valued more highly than milk butter. It melts easily and is highly digestible. Sheep tail fat is sucked by small children as a supplementary energy intake. People who make long distance caravan or other trips take sheep tail fat cooked in a specific way (Togtokhtor, 1883).

Some sheep intestines are used as a container. For example, the stomach and gut are cleaned and used to store butter and wet curd. The gut and duodenum are used to make blood sausages, and other small parts of the bowel are used for meat sausages.

Other products

Sheep droppings dry quickly and become wonderful livestock bedding material. In winter the droppings form a hard layer called *khonzon*, which is taken out and dried in the summer sun and used for fuel. The *khonzon* also serves as a building material to make open shelters for livestock. The upper part of the *khonzon*, which is called *shar buuts* (friable dung), is dried and used for livestock bedding under the name *khokh buuts* (dried dung).

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