Wanted: Tree Protectors

By Chingunjav Borkhuu

Climate change is not the only threat to the Mongolian Taiga – deforestation by man is putting its future in peril. At least someone is putting a stop to it.

Mongolia

Visitors to the Khentii Mountains or the area around Lake Khövsgöl in northern Mongolia can behold one of the primal forest areas in the world: barely any forest paths, few rangers and above all: a sharply jagged plateau with Siberian spruces, Pine trees and Larches as far as the eye can see. “You can ride through the forests of the Khentii Mountains for ten days without meeting a single soul,” says Klaus Schmidt-Corsitto, the leader of the GIZ project ‘Biodiversity and the Adaptation of Key Forest Ecosystems to Climate Change’.

It is no coincidence that the forest has remained untouched: 32 percent of the forest area of the so-called ‘Boreal Coniferous Forest’ – the type of forest reaching furthest north on earth – is located in official conservation areas. This is where numerous wild animals such as brown bears, elks and Altai wapiti frolic. But the idyll is deceiving. Mongolia’s forest area is decreasing by around 26,000 hectares annually, a surface almost as large as the city of Dortmund.

The main culprit is global warming. The temperature rise in the Taiga in the last 70 years amounted to more than two degrees Celsius, significantly higher than the global average. On the southern edge of the Taiga, rainfall is steadily decreasing. The consequence is that new germ buds cannot sprout, and dry up. This is how the southern border of the Taiga is continually pulling back to the North due to dryness. The local population is not completely innocent to all of this: Many shepherds let their goats and cows feed on the young plants on the forest edges. Forest fires started by people spread uncontrollably over large areas. And then there is the matter of overexploitation, which irreversibly damages the forest. “It would be sustainable to use about ten percent of the wood over ten years, taken equally from across the forest area,” according to Klaus Schmidt-Corsitto.

Instead, the forest fringe continue to be deforested, and nothing can grow in its place thereafter. There is another reason for the increasing dryness: commercial mining, one of the strongest driving forces of the booming Mongolian economy. The numerous gold mining firms in particular need large amounts of water to wash gold. And since a lot of water evaporates during this process, only around 80 percent is fed back into rivers at the end. Mongolian forest conservation laws are quite progressive. Parliament and the Ministry for the Environment recently reformed forestry and environmental legislation. A national plan to adapt to climate change is already in existence.

The laws cannot yet be accordingly implemented due to the lack of qualified environmental and forestry engineers. This is where the development assistance project fits in: on behalf of the German government, the GIZ is supporting the Mongolian authorities in the stabilisation of their forest stand. In the first instance, they have undertaken a needs-assessment – with a notable result: the sustainable management of an area of the Mongolian commercial forest the size of Belgium would require 2,700 trained forest workers. The GIZ cannot educate them all itself. Instead, it is developing teaching material, and training forestry teachers. This is where the transfer of know-how begins. "Our goal is to bring seven forestry schools to the level where they can train their own skilled forestry workers," says Schmidt-Corsitto. The curriculum would include instructions on the correct planting of trees in an arboretum, the tending to young vegetation, and how many trees per hectare can be sustainably cut down. Once the staff is fully trained, Mongolia should be able to fulfil all demand for timber legally, stripping the practice of overexploitation of any legitimacy. Abuse will also be made difficult by a planned certification system for timber businesses, the drafting of which is being carried out in cooperation with the agricultural company Hessen-Forst. The certificate will be awarded to those firms which fell only as many trees as the forest can cope with.