

## TOURISM IN KHUVSGUL LAKE NATIONAL PARK, NORTHERN MONGOLIA

Mungunchimeg Batsaikhan<sup>1</sup>**Cite:****Idézés:**

Batsaikhan, Mungunchimeg (2026). Tourism in Khuvsgul Lake National Park, Northern Mongolia. *Különleges Bánásmód Interdiszciplináris folyóirat [Special Treatment Interdisciplinary Journal]*, 12(1), 19–28. DOI <https://doi.org/10.18458/KB.2026.SI.19>

**EP / EE:**

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Ethics Permission / Etikai engedély: KB/2026/0013

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**Abstract**

Tourism has surged in Khuvsgul Lake National Park region in the past few decades. This area attracts both foreign and domestic visitors due to its natural scenery, cultural heritage and unique ethnic minorities. As a result, numerous tourist camps, restaurants, and shops have dramatically established in Khatgal village and lake surrounding campsite areas, recently. The area is also home to several indigenous ethnic communities including Tsaatan and Darkhad. They maintain distinct culture and diverse nomadic lifestyle. Tsaatan people depend on their reindeer herding while Darkhad nomads engage in pastoralism, raising livestock including yak. Local communities in this area actively participate in tourism development. However, rapid tourism growth can also introduce environmental pressures. This research aims to briefly describe main tourism patterns and trends in Khuvsgul Lake National Park and its surrounding camp site areas, indigenous ethnic communities with their cultural practices, their participation in tourism development and current ecological environment conditions. The research analyzes secondary data resources, literature, tourism and domestic statistics and firsthand field findings including visual observation.

**Keywords:** tourism in Khuvsgul Lake National Park, nomadic culture, cultural identity, residents' employment and seasonal income, environment

**Discipline:** cultural anthropology

<sup>1</sup> Mungunchimeg Batsaikhan (PhD student), University of Debrecen, Department of Ethnology, Debrecen (Hungary)(Mongolia). E-mail [saikhanbat1122@gmail.com](mailto:saikhanbat1122@gmail.com) ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7971-0112>

**Absztrakt****TURIZMUS A HÖVSGÜL-TÓ NEMZETI PARKBAN, ÉSZAK-MONGÓLIÁBAN**

Az elmúlt néhány évtizedben a turizmus jelentős növekedést mutatott a Khuvsgul-tó Nemzeti Park térségében. A terület mind a nemzetközi, mind a belföldi látogatók számára vonzóvá vált a természeti adottságai, kulturális öröksége, valamint egyedi etnikai kisebbségei révén. Ennek következtében az utóbbi időszakban dinamikus fejlődés tapasztalható Khatgal település és a tavat körülvevő kempingterületeken, a turisztikai táborok, a vendéglátóegységek és a kereskedelmi létesítmények nagy számú növekedésével. A térség több őshonos etnikai közösség lakóhelye is, köztük a Tsaatan és a Darkhad csoportoké, amelyek sajátos kulturális hagyományokkal és diverz nomád életmóddal rendelkeznek. A Tsaatan közösség megélhetése elsősorban rénszarvastenyésztésen alapul, míg a Darkhad nomádok állattartó pásztorkodást folytatnak, többek között jakokat tenyésztnek. A helyi közösségek aktívan részt vesznek a turizmus fejlesztésében, ugyanakkor a turizmus gyors ütemű bővülése környezeti terhelésekkel is járhat. Jelen kutatás célja a Khuvsgul-tó Nemzeti Parkban és a környező kempingterületeken megfigyelhető főbb turisztikai mintázatok és trendek rövid ismertetése, továbbá az őshonos etnikai közösségek kulturális gyakorlatainak, turizmusfejlesztésben való részvételüknek, valamint a jelenlegi ökológiai környezeti állapotnak a bemutatása. A vizsgálat másodlagos adatforrások, szakirodalmak, turisztikai és hazai statisztikák, valamint elsődleges terepi megfigyelések - beleértve a vizuális észlelést - elemzésén alapul.

**Kulcsszavak:** turizmus a Khuvsgul-tó Nemzeti Parkban; nomád kultúra; kulturális identitás; lakossági foglalkoztatás és szezonális jövedelem; környezet

**Tudományterület:** kulturális antropológia

**Introduction**

Tourism industry plays one of the most important roles in global economic development. According to the Statista (2025), the number of international tourist arrivals reached 1.52 billion globally in 2025. Tourists spending increased to around USD 1.9 trillion, showing 5% growth from 2024 (UN Tourism, 2026).

Tourism in Mongolia also indicates a growth trend. The country welcomed over 850.000 visitors from overseas in 2025, which is 14.8% growth compared to 2024. While Khuvsgul Lake National Park received 285.500 travelers in 2024, showing experiencing growth in local tourism industry.

Today, many tend to escape from their normal, busy city life or environment in order to relax and have great time. They prefer to experience more nature-based tourism and outdoor activity. Nature-based tourism involves a large number of different

outdoor activities such as hiking, horse-riding, and camping etc (Margaryan & Fredman, 2017). Experiencing in nature or the outdoors with primary attractions or setting where nature is in undisturbed or pristine state, they can feel more relaxed and forget daily stressful, and busy life (APA., 2020, Jimenez et al., 2021). Khuvsgul Lake National Park features clear example of this type of tourism.

Khuvsgul Lake National Park is located in the northern Mongolia and is famous for UNESCO biosphere reserve with its ecological importance. Several indigenous communities live in this region including Tsaatan and Darkhad with rich, diverse and unique nomadic cultures existing together in that place. The National Park has become one of the important tourist destinations in Mongolia for both domestic and international tourists over last two decades, because of natural beauty and cultural diversity.

In Mongolia, there is still limited research that examines detailed tourism research related to cultural identity, local traditions, and the natural environment. Therefore, the study is to investigate Khuvsgul Lake National Park, its habitats, tourism growth pattern in the national park, local people, and their participation in tourism.

### **Khuvsgul Lake National Park**

Mongolia is a landlocked country located between two large nations, Russia to the north and China to the south (Figure 1) and it has a territory over 1.56 million square kilometers. Population of Mongolia is relatively small, approximately 3.5 million (NSOM, 2025). Therefore, population density is very low, with around 1.5 people per square kilometer, particularly in remote and rural areas.

*Figure 1. Map of Mongolia.*



Khatgal village is situated in the southern tip of Khuvsgul Lake. The village was first established in 1727 as a military camp and later developed port town for trading between Russia and Mongolia. During socialist period, between 1930-1990, the village blossomed significantly with oil base, wood processing plants and wool washing factories etc and settlement population reached 7000 (KSKP, 2024). Today the settlement numbers is around 3700 (NSOM, 2020).

Khuvsgul Lake National Park is located in Khuvsgul province in northern Mongolia, covers a total area of 9,920 square kilometers. The national park includes four soum (administrative units) such as

Alag-Erdene, Renchinlumbe, Khankh and Chandmana-Undur serves as the main settlements within the park.

Khuvsgul Lake (also locally known as “Blue Pearl”, “Mother Sea”) is located within National Park. The Lake is the second-largest freshwater lake in Asia and holds approximately 70% of Mongolia and 0.4% of world freshwater reserves (Prokopenko et al., 2007, Orkhonselenge et al., 2022). The lake is 136 km long, 27 km wide and 268 meters deep (Imler, 2025) and it lies at an elevation of 1645m above sea level. Over 90 rivers flow into Khuvsgul Lake, while only one, Eg River, flows out. It is considered one of the seventeen ancient lakes in the world, estimated to be more than two million years old (McCarthy et al., 2018). The Mongolian government declared Khuvsgul Lake and its watershed under state protection in 1992, as a Natural Complex Protected Area. In 2022, the Khuvsgul Lake National park has been registered as UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, because of its high ecological value.

The National Park is home to some of the highest levels of biodiversity in the world (McCarthy et al., 2018; Bank, A. D., 2021). Dense forests of spruce and larch (locally known as taiga) cover surrounding mountain ranges. The taiga forest is home to various creatures for rare mammals such as ibex, argali sheep, Siberian roe deer, red foxes, and endangered snow leopards. There are 12 species of fish inhabit in the area several of them are endemic including subspecies of Siberian grayling and roach (McCarthy et al., 2018; Bank, A. D., 2021; Imler, 2025). The area is also very rich in bird species, with more than 200 recorded, including golden eagles, bearded vultures, and various cranes (Imler, 2025).

### **Ethnic communities**

Population of Mongolia is 3.5 million (NSOM, 2025). Ethnically, 94.4% percent of the population consider themselves Mongols. A majority of Mongols are subgroup of Khalkha, and remaining are

Buryat, Durvud, Drakhad, Khotgoid and others. Another 5% of are ethnic Khazakh, Tuvan (Tsaatan) and other ethnicities (Gabbay, 2015).

Population of Khuvsgul province was 136,885 in 2023, with a population density of approximately 1.4 people per square kilometer. This province is in northern Mongolia, so indigenous people are called Northern Mongolian communities including Khalkh as the majority, along with 13.7% Darkhad and 5.2% Khotgoid, as well as Buriat, Uriankhai, and Tsaatan (NSOM.,2020).

These people have historically maintained a nomadic way of life, based on relationships with land, life stocks (animals), and seasonal migration. These everyday practices are basement of their cultural practices and cultural identities. Most communities in this region speak Mongolian language some with low and/or strong dialect. Only, Tsaatan people speak different language (Tuvan language).

Among northern Mongolian communities, a unique and small indigenous ethnic group is called the Tsaatan (Picture 1). The word *Tsaatan* means „reindeer herders” in Mongolian.

*Picture 1. Tsaatan reindeer herders with their herd in northern Mongolia. Source: responsible travel (n.d.)*



They are of Tuvan origin (Inamura T., 2005; Aiyzhy E., 2018) and have traditionally lived in a very close relationship with their reindeer and the taiga forest. Their cultural identity, daily practices, and worldview are strongly shaped by long-term human-animal relationship. According to Flenniken (2007), the Tsaatan, an indigenous people of the northernmost province of Mongolia, have

preserved their unique culture through nomadic reindeer husbandary. Indigenous reindeer herding practices and cultural strategies link the survivability of the people with the survivability of their reindeer. Another important aspect of their culture is 'boo'/shamanic belief system. Tsaatans are among few ethnic communities that have remarkably preserved their strong shamanic traditions and rituals a nomadic long side way of life over many generations.

Their traditional homes are called 'urts'(Picture 1), which are made with long wooden poles and thick waterproof cloth (in the past, animal skins were used instead of cloth). The urts perform the most important part of their culture and daily life, keeping them warm in extreme cold weather in taiga, temperatures can be -40 to -50 C. Moreover, 'urts' is an integral part of their culture, and it is lightweight and easy to assemble and disassemble, making "urts" highly suitable for nomadic lifestyle that depends on frequent relocation with their reindeer. Their nomadic lifestyle and unique cultural practices truly attract domestic and international tourists and researchers. As a result, the Tsaatan have become an important cultural and tourism feature of the Khuvsgul Lake National Park region.

Another important indigenous community in this region is Darkhad. Badamkhatan (1965) described, 'Darhad' is an ethnic Mongolian group who lives in the northern part of Khuvsgul province. They speak Mongolian language with a strong local dialect. Like other Mongolian ethnic communities, Darkhad are traditionally nomadic and breed livestock locally called „tavan khoshuu mal” including cows, horses, sheep, goats and camels.

The Khuvsgul region is rich in higher mountains therefore yaks are also popular livestock for local residents. And they live in a Mongolian traditional home ger (Picture 2) with walls, poles and a peaked roof covered with canvas and felt and tightened with ropes. It is light enough for nomads to carry and move (UNESCO, 2013).

Picture 2. Mongol traditional home ger and its building process. Source: UNESCO, 2013



Their traditional song is distinct song starting with high tone of the music. So, they have strong vocal skills. Many of them believe Buddhism, but there are still strong remnants of shamanism among the Darkhad community. Shamanic rituals are the most important and attractive tourism activities among the tourists and scholars.

Today, there are more than 1,200 tour companies (about 120 of them actively operating), around 370 hotels, and more than 300 tourist camps, employing over 50,000 people in total (TIC., 2015, MB&TDC, 2019). In terms of economic contribution, tourism is considered the third largest sector after mining and agriculture. (MB&TDC, 2019).

### Khuvsgul Lake National Park and Tourism

#### Tourism in Mongolia

Mongolia is known for its nomadic lifestyle, untouched natural landscapes, rich history and well preservation traditional culture. These features show that Mongolia has abundant tourism resources. This wide-open landscape, together with rich natural environments and nomadic traditions, makes Mongolia attractive to natural and cultural tourists from around the world.

Tourism services in Mongolia were first introduced in 1954 and were limited to organized groups of visitors, hunters, and travelers mostly from socialist countries. This marked the beginning of institutionalized tourism development in Mongolia. After 1990, Mongolia transitioned to a democratic system and opened its economy to the world (TIC., 2015) and tourism sector began to develop gradually.

Figure 2. Tourists in Mongolia and Khuvsgul Lake National Park, between 2000 and 2025 (NSOM, 2025)

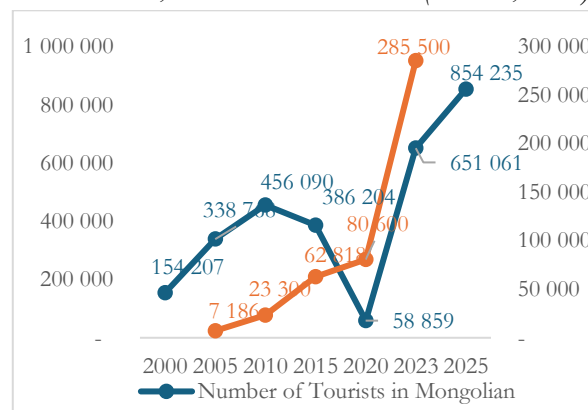


Figure 2 illustrates development pattern of tourism in Mongolia over past two decades. The number of tourists visiting in Mongolia has been steadily growing from about 150,000 in 2000 to more than 570,000 in 2019. Although tourist numbers dropped sharply in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the

sector recovered quickly, and by 2025 the number of international visitors exceeded 850,000 (NSOM, 2025).

### **Tourism growth in Khuvsgul Lake National Park**

Since the fall of socialism, tourism in the National Park has developed and now it is one of the most important tourist destinations in Mongolia for both domestic and international visitors. Major attractions in this region are pristine nature, well-preserved nomadic culture, reindeer herding traditions and diverse cultural heritage. The number of visitors to the National Park increased rapidly over the past 15 years. Traveler numbers grew from approximately 7,000 in 2005 to about 285,000 in 2024 (AD&TO, 2025). Interestingly, tourist arrivals did not decline during the pandemic in this region. The trend illustrates significant growth interest of domestic visitors (Figure 2).

The development of tourism infrastructure has followed this increase in visitor numbers. The number of tourism service providers has grown by an average of three times over the past 25 years. Hotels experienced the fastest growth, increasing 9.5 times from 2 in 2005 to 19 in 2025. Tourist camps increased 2.9 times, from 41 in 2005 to 120 in 2025, while ger camps grew 2.6 times, from 65 in 2005 to 171 in 2025. In addition, small food processing plants have been newly established, reaching 11 by 2025 (TIC, 2015; AD&TO, 2025).

In 2019, the Government of Mongolia announced its plan to further develop Khuvsgul Lake National Park as an eco-tourism destination (GOM, 2019), reflecting its growing economic importance. These figures clearly show that tourism plays an important role in the development of northern Mongolia.

### **Tourist activities in Khuvsgul Lake National Park**

Tourism can be classified into many types. Among these types, natural tourism, eco-tourism, and

adventure tourism are formed of outdoor travel. In Mongolia, tourists mainly choose adventure, natural tourism, cultural tourism and eco-tourism. Activities commonly include nomadic and local culture (art performance, husbandry practices, and shamanic rituals), paleontological tours (dinosaur fossils) to Mongolian Gobi Desert and National Parks. Some visit to experience Mongolian traditional cultural festivals for example Naadam, Reindeer & Tsaatan festival, Camel festival and Khukh Suvd ice festival etc. Tourism peak season is between June to September (Picture 3).

*Picture 3. Khatgal Village (Field work 8 AUG. 2025)*



In Khuvsgul Lake National Park, tourists usually visit to enjoy the beautiful nature and experience nomadic culture. Many draw the several minority ethnic communities Tsaatan and Darkhad with their unique lifestyle in taiga region and religious rituals. Popular activities include relaxing in nature, horse and reindeer riding, trekking, exploring shamanic and cultural practices, photo shooting, birdwatching, and fishing.

### **Local people participation in tourism**

According to the official records of the Khatgal village, there are 3,738 registered residents, of which 21% (around 800 households) are engaged in livestock herding. The largest proportion at 63.13% (2,360) of people work as freelancers and in tourism-related activities. Meanwhile, 15% (560 people) are employed at tourist camps, and 1.23% (46 people) work as guides (NSOM, 2020; AD&TO, 2025). These figures demonstrate the increasing importance of tourism in the local economy.

Today, local people and herders actively participate in tourism as a source of additional income.

Many perceive tourism as the main driving force of the regional economy.

They are involved in various tourism-related activities, including reindeer and horse guiding, selling meat and dairy products, working in tourist camps, producing handicrafts and selling souvenirs, and running small shops, restaurants, hotels and tourist camps. One of the most rapidly expanding services is home stay accommodation, where families host visitors in their homes, shovgor (cabins) and gers (yurt) in their backyards.

Overall, local people have become highly dependent on tourism. Nearly all working age residents except children and the elderly are engaged in seasonal tourism-related work.

*Picture 4. Tsaatan handicrafts, including carved antlers, reindeer skin pouches, soapstone carvings and leatherwork. (Anna Kaminski) ([Link](#))*



It has notably accelerated village development, particularly in infrastructure, tourist accommodations, and buildings constructions. Another major improvement has been education. Since tourism began in the area, local people have started learning foreign languages, and many can now communicate in English and other languages to sell their products and interact with visitors.

### Ecological Issue

The ecological pressure in Khuvsgul Lake National Park is not only current problem. It has some

historical roots. During the socialist era, water transport, many industrial factories, such as fuel depots, a wool washing factory, and a wood processing plant significantly contributed to environmental pollution and the loss of ecological balance. One of the most notable examples is the ship “Sukhbaatar” (Figure 5) that sank in the lake in 1985 (Yadam et al., 2024). In addition, more than 28 vehicles transporting fuel, fertilizer, and supplies broke through the ice and sank to the bottom of the lake, some of which are still polluting the lake’s ecosystem (News, 2024).

*Picture 5. “Sukhbaatar“ sunken ship, Khatgal village (field work 15 Jul. 2025)*



Mongolian government, in collaboration with foreign and domestic organizations implemented a clean-up project between 2020 and 2024. The project included pulled up waste by towing a 309-ton ship and 10 (Figure 6) other vehicles along with fuel, oil, lubricants, and other hazardous waste (Yadam et al., 2024, News, 2024).

Today, tourism in the Khuvsgul Lake National Park region is rapidly developing. Regional tourism is mainly based on natural environment. Nature-based tourism has both positive and negative environmental impacts. Positive sides include environmental protection, improving ecological knowledge of both local residents and tourists, and increasing local income. However, negative impacts include water and waste pollution, soil degradation, habitat disturbance, and overuse of natural resources.

Nowadays, people prefer to spend their leisure time in pristine natural environment. The main rea-

son is development of urban area extension, and rapid population growth in where green spaces are partially disappearing (Goddard et al., 2009). As a result, the nature and rural protected areas have become popular tourist destinations.

*Picture 6. Sunken vehicles, Khatgal village (field work 15 Jul. 2025)*



In Mongolia, almost half of the total population (NSOP, 2025) lives in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, and the amount of green space in the city is limited (City Plan 20/40, 2019). Therefore, the number of residents traveling and spending their leisure time in rural, natural, protected areas, such as Khuvsgul Lake National Park for leisure, had increased steadily in recent years.

Tourism significantly contributes to the regional economy. As the number of tourists increases, the number of ger camps, tourist camps, and hotels has increased, and leading to expansion of resort area. However, increasing number of tourists leads to environmental pressure. During the peak season solid waste and dumping / open waste are crucial issues for national park administration staff. In this time waste always exceeds their management due to lack of ecological knowledge among some locals and tourists. They also leave waste in protected area zones when traveling by horse, reindeer, or hiking.

Another major negative impact is the loss of the fragile ecosystem of Khuvsgul Lake National Park. Due to the feet of tourists, wild animals run far away, their habitats are being changed, their migrations are being reduced, and the boundaries of

their habitats are being reduced, which is threatening the extinction of endangered species (Bank, A. D., 2021)

Tourism also affects local pastoral livelihoods. Herders may be forced to move their livestock farther from tourists' areas due to land use pressures and in some cases, they pay other herders to take care of their livestock away from tourism destinations.

There are, however, positive activities in environmental management. In terms of waste, the Mongolian government, in cooperation with the Asian Development Bank, has built a land fill waste collecting center for sorting and burial in away from tourism areas. A landfill waste facility was constructed to run in 2024 (EMR., 2024). The land fill center also receives wastewater.

Some local horse and reindeer guides collect the waste left in the open fields and bring them to the waste center.

These examples suggest that, if environmental issues are managed properly, tourism activities have the potential to develop more sustainably. However, due to the limited availability of comprehensive research on this topic, further investigation is needed and will be addressed in future studies.

## Conclusion

This study shows that Khuvsgul Lake National Park is one of the well-known and most important tourist destinations in Mongolia.

The area features freshwater Khuvsgul Lake, its biosphere ecosystem, and ethnic communities with unique cultural practices. These features attract tourists from domestic and overseas.

According to the statistical data, the number of tourists has significantly increased recently. This rapid growth provides plenty of job opportunities for locals. Moreover, many locals actively participate in tourism-related activities such as guiding, producing and selling handicrafts, running their own busi-

nesses, working as camp staff and learning foreign languages. As a result, tourism provides them with a seasonal but relatively stable source of income.

In addition, tourism also supports local and regional development. Infrastructure has been improved by paved roads, service facilities, tourist camps, and hotels.

However, tourism growth is also followed by environmental pressure including ecological imbalances, waste issues and habitat destruction. Future research will focus more deeply on how tourism development influences local residents and ecological environment positively and negatively.

### Acknowledgement

The author sincerely acknowledges to Prof. Gábor Biczó for his valuable suggestions and guidance during the preparation of this research. The author also thanks Batchimeg Nyamrenchin (Specialist, Livestock Breeding Department, Murun, Khuvsgul province) for her assistance with data collection.

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