

Altai argali (*Ovis ammon ammon*) Surveys in Siilkhemii Nuruu National Park of Mongolia

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Abstract

A preliminary survey of argali distribution and population structure in Siilkhemii Nuruu National Park from November 22-25, 2001, documented 238 argali in 12 distinct groups over four observation days. Of the 225 argali characterized, 29 adult males, 138 adult females, and 58 lambs were recorded. Mean group size was 20.0 (range 1-119, s.d. 34.0), with a lamb to female ratio of 42:100, and male to female ratio of 21:100. Additionally, important winter forage areas were delineated for planning future argali management efforts within the park. Increased cooperation between Mongolian and Russian governments and protected area administrations is necessary for the creation of more detailed monitoring and management programs for the transboundary argali populations of the Sailugem and Chikhacheva mountains.

Key words: argali, conservation, management, Mongolia, Altai-Sayan

Introduction

Siilkhemii Nuruu (Sailugem Range) National Park (SNNP) is located in Mongolia's westernmost province of Bayan-Olgii (Figure 1). SNNP was created in 2000 primarily for the protection of Altai argali (*Ovis ammon ammon*) and is divided into two sections, which cover a combined area of 140,080 ha (Myagmarsuren, 2000). Spanning portions of Ulaankhus and Nogoon Nuur provincial counties, SNNP and is one of four protected areas under the management the Mongol Altai Nuruu Special Protected Areas Administration (MANSPAA) in Bayan-Olgii province. As with many protected areas in the region, MANSPAA and its three rangers in SNNP have had little involvement in the area due to limited resources.

The Sailugem mountains form part of the Mongolian-Russian border and intersect the Chikhacheva range at the borders of the Altai and Tuva republics of Russia. This alpine and mountain steppe environment is composed of high plateaus, broad valleys, and undulating hills ranging in elevation from 2473 m at the Bor Borgusen river to 4029 m at Ikh Turgen peak. Weather in this region is characterized by a strong continental climate with severe winters, a short growing season, and

approximately 300-400 mm of annual precipitation (Hilbig, 1995). The Sailugem and Chikhacheva ranges were once considered some of the best wild sheep hunting grounds in Central Asia as reflected in Demidoff's (1900) and Carruthers' (1913) accounts of hunting trips to the region.

Argali in SNNP make seasonal, transboundary migrations and are known to winter in Mongolia predominately on relatively sheltered southern slopes (Davarkhbayar, *et al.*, 2000). Habitat disturbance and overgrazing by local herders and their livestock have displaced many argali to marginal pasture in SNNP. In addition to local herders, several Mongolian National Border Posts are located along the length of SNNP with many inhabited year round by soldiers, their families, and livestock herds.

Adjacent to SNNP, the Sailugem or Khosh Agach Refuge (241,300 ha) is located on the Russian side of the Sailugem range and was created in 1973 for protection of argali (Figure 1) (Paltsyn and Spitsyn, 2002). Poaching by both local residents and visiting Russian hunters is commonly reported for this area (Maroney and Paltsyn, 2003); however, lower stocking rates create significantly less grazing competition between argali and domestic livestock than found in SNNP (Paltsyn & Spitsyn, 2002; Abaturov *et al.*, in press).