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Mongolia's Monks Take Up New Cause: Saving Giant Salmon

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Anglers Persuade Buddhists
To Preach Preservation;
One Fish Equals 999 Souls

By PETER WONACOTT

ALONG THE UUR RIVER, Mongolia—Here in the glacial-blue waters of this wild and remote river, the elusive Siberian salmon, known as the taimen, is in danger of vanishing forever.

Scientists and American sport fishermen working to save the taimen have drafted an unlikely ally: a 26-year-old Buddhist monk who wears a mustard-colored robe and uses a single name, Gantulga.

Their plan calls for Gantulga and his fellow monks to use their moral authority to persuade the locals to stamp out poaching and habitat destruction. The wealthy fly fishermen must do their part by pumping money into the local economy. The hope: These disparate partners can persuade Mongolians to protect their wildlife.

But in a country where Buddhism is the predominant religion, making the unusual partnership work is proving to be a

delicate cultural matter. Buddhists are taught not to harm any living things. Scientists need to tag fish. Fly fishermen like to catch them. Monks like Gantulga have had to bend some of their core beliefs.

Among sport fishermen, the taimen are legendary. They can reach six feet in length and weigh 200 pounds, twice the size of Alaska's king salmon. They have been known to burst out of the water to swallow baby ducks and squirrels.

Tourists such as U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor have paid thousands of dollars to catch and release the giant fish here, a spot famous among a global fraternity of fly fishermen. American companies like Sweetwater Travel Co. of Livingston, Mont., a participant in the conservation project, charge tourists about \$5,000 each for a week of fishing.

But poachers and gold miners exploring the river valley and nearby mountains are threatening the fish. Losing the taimen would be a blow to this poor country, because sport fishermen provide one of its few significant sources of foreign currency.

The International Finance Corp., the private lending arm of the World Bank, is leading the funding of the \$2.3 million conservation project. It aims to train additional rangers to police against poaching, and to help the Mongolian government develop a land-leasing system under which tourist operators will funnel money back into local communities. For all this to work, planners say, locals must see value in protecting the fish.

That's where the monks come in. Mongolia's brand of Buddhism is tinged with the shamanistic worship of nature. References to sacred mountains, rivers and animals dot local Buddhist scriptures, or sutras.

To win over the monks, project supporters had to explain the nuances of *Please Turn to Page A10, Column 5*

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catch-and-release fishing, and sell them on the benefits of allowing Western anglers to hook the giant fish over and over again.

"We realize [Buddhists] may have a real problem with putting a hook in a fish's mouth and dragging it around," says Jeffrey Liebert, the investment officer at the International Finance Corp. responsible for the project. "But it's a choice between no fish and fish."

To help the monks overcome their aversion to the sport, project organizers offered an attractive incentive: help in restoring a local monastery destroyed nearly 70 years ago in a government purge. Buddhism was banned by Mongolia's communist government until 1990. Now, the nation's monks are eager to rebuild their ranks.

So now they are combing ancient texts, many written in Tibetan, to find statements that promote environmental virtues, but don't preclude catch-and-release fishing. Gantulga, who grew up near the taimen's waters and went on to study at the national monastery, is one of a younger generation of Mongolians more open to blending traditional beliefs with contemporary tastes.

He is among the few who can translate the area's ancient sutras into modern Mongolian. He carries prayer beads, meditates, and fasts. He also carries a cellphone, and on a recent plane flight, had no problem recognizing a Mongolian techno-music boy band seated behind him.

Until a decade ago, taimen poaching wasn't much of a problem. Northern Europeans could find the taimen in their own rivers easily enough. Mongolians traditionally don't eat fish, and the rivers where the giant Siberian salmon swim were difficult to reach.

But these days, Mongolian urbanites are developing a taste for taimen, which are sold illegally in some markets in Ulaanbaatar, the capital, and more people are reaching the river by four-wheel-drive vehicle. In the winter, European and Chinese poachers cut holes in the ice to spear or net the taimen.

Fish and game poachers aren't meeting much resistance. They have binoculars, guns and jeeps. Rangers are unarmed and on foot.

In a recent meeting with ranger trainees, Gantulga learned of one place where few Mongolians hunt. If a Mongolian kills any animal in the Baby God Moun-



Scientist Zeb Hogan observes a taimen

ains, it is believed that his family members could die in divine retribution.

"Maybe we can point out the other sacred sites, and tell them the spirits of Baby God Mountains protect the taimen's rivers and the valleys," Gantulga muses.

One of Gantulga's colleagues recently located a long-lost sutra which warns that for every fish killed, 999 human souls will suffer. According to a popular taboo, people who mistreat rivers, such as by urinating or washing dirty dishes in them, risk the wrath of temperamental water spirits known as Lus. Their punishment: flood, famine and skin infections.

"Mongolians believe there are spirits in the river and that the fish belong to them," says Gantulga. "We try to leave the fish where they are."

Although the monks remain uneasy with the concept of sport fishing, Gantulga and others have come to recognize that fly-fishing tour operators have something valuable to offer.

Last month, Bill Dehoff, a veterinarian from Columbus, Ohio, was fly-fishing in a lagoon off the Uur. A fish struck, and after a 15-minute fight, Mr. Dehoff and his buddies landed a 54-inch taimen. They posed for pictures, and then released it.

After returning to Ohio, another member of Mr. Dehoff's fishing party pledged \$25,000 for the monastery rebuilding, bringing the total raised in recent months to \$35,000.

In June, the taimen conservation fund helped pay for the erection of a small Buddhist shrine where the destroyed monastery had stood. A few local families expressed hope that their sons might become monks at the monastery once it is restored.

Gantulga says he has come to believe that catch-and-release fishing is "acceptable" and serves his religion's larger goals. "The project's work may last several years, but it's doable," he says. "Mine will last a lifetime."



Gantulga, a Mongolian monk (center), American scientist Zeb Hogan (left) and sport-fishing guide Dan Vermillion (right)