

**ITG**

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Interview with Alessandra Confalonieri (in english)

(She works for Instituto Oikos as project coordinator in Takhintal, Mongolia in the socio-economic sector)



Alessandra Confalonieri from Oikos

ITG: Alessandra, please give us a short introduction of you and OIKOS.

Alessandra: Istituto Oikos is an independent NGO, founded in Milan in 1996. It operates in Europe, Africa, Kirgystan, Brazil, Myanmar and Mongolia to promote the conservation and the sustainable management of natural resource as an instrument for economic and social development.

Since 2008 Istituto Oikos is working in partnership with International Takhi Group (ITG) and the Great Gobi B SPA for the environmental conservation and the sustainable development of the communities living in the buffer zone of the Gobi B.

I am Alessandra Confalonieri an Italian female, 27 years old with a strong motivation to continue to work in international development. I started to work for Istituto Oikos when I was attending a post-graduate course about sustainable and responsible tourism

management, which included a 3 months internship in the field. At that time, Istituto Oikos was starting in Tanzania a community development project which aimed at spreading the knowledge of natural and cultural resources of Northwestern Tanzania and distributing the benefits of tourism to the rural communities. For this reason in May 2006 I moved to Tanzania, initially for only the 3 months-internship; afterwards, after falling in love with the place and the people I extended my stay for 2 years. Was during my work experience that it become clear to me how important is to hold the proper tools and skills in order to work effectively with people, indeed dealing with communities means influence and change the future lives. Consequently concluding the African experience I decided to go for further studies and I enrolled in the MSc Environment and Sustainable Development at the University College London. I was planning to stay in Europe at the end of the course, when I moved to Mexico to follow my personal life; however 'destiny' took me back to Istituto Oikos. Now I am coordinating the community development project in Mongolia in the Great Gobi B SPA where I live and work since May 2010.

ITG: What are you doing in Takhin Tal?

Alessandra: My main responsibility is to coordinate the overall operation of the project, by organizing different trainings to build the capacity of the communities living in the buffer zone of the Great Gobi B SPA. I am in charge to plan the trainings content, select the organisation delivering the trainings and supervise the implementation of them.

Trainings about felt production, carving practices, sustainable tourism and sustainable livestock management have been organized, including more than 160 people in Bij, Soyombo, Barlag and Altangatas villages (in the Gobi-Altai Aimag and the Khovd Aimag). Now the small-business activities have been integrated into their mainly pastoral livelihood, and two multi-cooperatives have been registered.

ITG: What is the goal of your work?

Alessandra: The project aims to improve the livelihood of the people, by providing additional income opportunities. Indeed the people involved in the trainings have the capacity to improve their life conditions in this rural and remote area of Mongolia. Improving the livelihood of rural people will stop the constant migration from rural to urban centres and will also increase the awareness about environment conservation. To be sure the project is encouraging the preservation of the ecosystem and is providing a better collaboration between the local people and the Great Gobi B SPA.

ITG: What makes your project successful?

Alessandra: It is difficult to assess the project at this time of the implementation. We would need to wait next spring to analyse and evaluate the project results. However, the fact that people are grateful for the received teaching and are requesting further trainings, demonstrates a positive interest from the main actors of the project. The successfulness of the project depends on the people and on their motivation and possibility to implement the additional income generating activities, as well as on the opportunities they will have to enter in the local and international markets. Additionally an excellent collaboration with ITG and the Great Gobi B SPA will develop encouraging results for the project.

ITG: What is your impression of the reintroduction- project?

Alessandra: The reintroduction of the Takhi in the Great Gobi B SPA is a very interesting and challenging project and to be sure the ITG long term commitment is a great opportunity for the development of the socio-economic component of the local communities. Rarely, in international development, it is possible to ensure such a support from an organisation in the implementation of a project as ITG is showing with the people and environment of the Great Gobi B SPA.

ITG: What are your personal impressions?

Alessandra: Unfortunately I am facing a great limitation which is given by my lack of Mongolian language and to be sure this did not allow me to really learn about the Mongolian culture even if I am living and working with Mongolians. In additions my personal impression is build on the experiences I am shearing with those families living in the Great Gobi B SPA, who I consider very special because are still not yet influenced by the constant progress of development, which often forces people to leave their traditions to gain something that not always is better.

Here in the Great Gobi B people are very generous and a guest is always welcome and treated as a holy person. I am working with herds' nomad families who manly use the animal products as main

ingredient of their diet, and the other day I had a funny experience: I met a 54 years old woman, who looked like 75 and who never ate and never will eat vegetables because she does not like them and she thinks they are not good for the organism. When I told her that I know people who eat only vegetables she could not believe it. I was wondering what a European nutritionist would say about this old Mongolian lady.

The desert is a nice place to visit, the endless landscapes and the silent sound of this place are unique, but living here is very hard and people have developed an impressive tolerance against the strong winter and the loneliness they are experiencing. I could feel only in part what does it mean to live in the desert, but I completely understand the limitation of human being in such a severe environment, where only who was born here, knows how to face.

ITG: Thank you!