NOMADIC STUDIES

INVITED COMMENTARY

The Taij Khairkhan Declaration

Presented to the 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 2026

During the 17th Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP17), an international group of 65 social scientists, herders, and practitioners convened at Taij Khairkhan, Mongolia to discuss the future of mobile pastoralism and to issue a set of recommendations directed at ensuring cultural rights, knowledge transmission, and climate resilience. Our strong consensus is that mobility processes, including the institutions that support them, are essential to the health of rangeland-pastoralism systems and must be financed as a whole. To that end, we have collectively authored this Declaration including 10 Calls to Action.

Nomadic Studies No. 33 (2026): Nomadic Futures (2026). Published by the International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations under the auspices of UNESCO. This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International.
https://doi.org/10.67086/6y4nhc75

We, the scholars, herders, and practitioners participating in the "Nomadic Futures: Cultural Rights, Knowledge Systems, Climate Resilience" conference at Taij Khairkhan, Mongolia, convened by the International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations under the auspices of UNESCO,

Acknowledging the international recognition of mobile pastoralists through actions to mark the UN International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (2026);

Affirming the principles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), which asserts the rights to self-determination, traditional lands, and distinct cultural institutions, including, for nomadic communities, the practice of mobility itself;

Recognizing the calls for rights and recognition and action presented in the 2024 UN Special Rapporteur's Report on Mobile Indigenous Peoples,[1] the 2024 Sardi International Workshop on Camelid Pastoralism,[2] the 2007 Fribourg Declaration on Cultural Rights,[3] the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001),[4] the Dana Declaration on Mobile Peoples and Conservation (2002)[5] and Dana Manifesto (2022),[6] the "Nomadic living heritage safeguarding" declaration of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia (2023), the 2024 Statement on Nomadic Ethics and Intercultural Dialogue,[7] the Global Declaration of Young Pastoralists (2026),[8] the Kathmandu Declaration of Pastoralist Women (2026),[9] and the Nomads Red Line Initiative for Sustainable Pasture Rights (2026),[10] which together affirm mobility as a right and mobile peoples as partners in land stewardship;

Welcoming UNESCO's inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of "Transhumance, the seasonal droving of livestock" (2023), "Mongol nomadic migration and its associated practices" (2024), "Traditional knowledge and skills in making Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Karakalpak yurts" (2025), and 24 other[11] distinct cultural practices and expressions of intangible heritage that are directly associated with mobile pastoralism, confirming that mobile pastoralism — including its spiritual beliefs and practices — is already recognized as heritage worth protecting, not merely a livelihood to be managed;

Underlining the importance of building on this foundation and extending it into the specific arena of climate finance;

Address this declaration to the Parties assembled at the 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

Our message

The combined effect of climate change and market-driven transformations of animal production and land use are major drivers of land degradation, while also contributing to increased temperatures, soil erosion, decreasing soil moisture, changing precipitation patterns, wildfires, and other impacts on vegetation, biodiversity, and the atmosphere. Mobile pastoralism—rangeland systems are heavily impacted by these effects.[12] Degradation and desertification are not only crises of the soil, but also crises in the relationship between people and land. As the Elders of Indigenous and mobile pastoralist communities teach, this relationship is one of reciprocity and deep responsibility, guided by traditional knowledge and practices that, in many mobile pastoralist communities, encompass sacred teachings, ritual and ceremony. Where this relationship has been sustained for generations through mobility, flexibility, and the accumulated knowledge of pastoralist communities, grasslands have remained healthy. Where mobility has been restricted, fragmented, or prohibited, both the land and the bonds that care for it have degraded.

Pastoralism is not simply livestock-raising that happens to involve movement. It is a specialized strategy for turning environmental unpredictability into opportunity, tracking scattered, shifting resources across space and time rather than trying to fix and control them. For decades, misguided development policy treated pastoralism as a stage to be outgrown, promoting settlement and fixed-land ranching as a more modern alternative. In the face of climate change — with climate variability increasing and the growing risk of triggering tipping points in natural systems — this vision of modernization is now obsolete. The systems built for stability, which rely on fossil fuel, are most at risk, while those built to work with climate variability are best fit for the future.

The evidence is clear: pastoral mobility more often enhances biodiversity and resilience than diminishes them. Mobility is a climate-compatible strategy already proven at scale that keeps people, herds, and land in living relationships.

> **We therefore call on the Parties to shift the terms of the conversation: from funding new adaptation projects imposed on pastoralists, to financing pastoralism itself, on its own terms.**

Mobile pastoralism and mobility practices to be recognized and financed[13]

We call on Parties to finance mobility as a dynamic range of processes, refined over generations and continuously adjusted to the rhythms of variable landscapes. These processes require freedom and unimpeded movement, and include (but are not limited to): routine seasonal migrations; mountain transhumance; migration between pasture and water sources; flexible herd migrations in response to foraging and hunting opportunities; emergency access to short-term grazing; and migration across administrative boundaries.

Mobility also requires access to primary and reserve pastures, natural water sources, springs, wells, winter, spring, summer, and autumn camps, seasonal routes and sacred mountains, cairns (ovoo), pilgrimage routes and other spiritually important sites. Mobility further depends on maintaining herd integrity across generations; flexibility in the timing of production and culling in response to variable social-ecological conditions; access to digital information and off-grid renewable energy; and the ability to maintain native breeds and genetic resources adapted to arid and desert environments, notably camelids.

These processes, including the institutions that support them, are essential to the health of rangeland-pastoralism systems. Therefore, they need to be financed as a whole.

Calls to action

We call on Parties to:

1. **Redirect climate finance toward enabling the self-determination of mobile pastoralist peoples and support mobile pastoralism itself** as the direct object of investment and circular-economy. Legally recognize customary tenure, including access to seasonal grazing lands, sacred sites, water points, and mobility across administrative boundaries, including the flexible and informal mechanisms through which herders already manage variability.
2. **Legally recognize and protect customary mobile land tenure systems and mobility rights** as a precondition for rangeland health, keeping the relationship between herd, herder, and landscape intact rather than allowing it to be divided by competing land uses. Legal protections must extend to mobile pastoralist minorities within majority nation-states, not on-

ly to communities recognized as Indigenous under UNDRIP; otherwise, these protections will remain inaccessible to a significant share of the world's pastoralists.[14]

3. **Require free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) and social and cultural impact assessment**[15] wherever mining, crop agriculture, or other land uses threaten herders' rights to their territories and homelands, recognizing that damage to sacred sites and migration routes is a form of harm no economic gain can offset. Free, prior and informed consent includes the right to withhold consent, and any such refusal must be respected.
4. **Ban the forced relocation, resettlement, or sedentarization of pastoralist and nomadic communities**. Because the cultural, spiritual, and knowledge systems of mobile peoples are bound to specific landscapes — particular pastures, water sources, migration routes, and sacred sites — they rely on ties that cannot be relocated or reconstituted elsewhere, even with financial compensation. No restoration project, conservation designation, extractive concession, carbon or offset scheme, or climate adaptation program may proceed on terms that displace a pastoralist community from its territory.
5. **Recognize and finance mobile pastoralism as primary base of the sustainability of human and nature**, allocating dedicated climate-resilience funding to safeguard the traditional knowledge and practices associated with pastoralism through UN Conventions and its mechanisms. The cultural heritage of mobile pastoralism also includes the traditional knowledge associated with domestic animal biodiversity that pastoralists develop, maintain and adapt over generations. Livestock breed diversity and genetic resources are cultural heritage, and a repository of tacit knowledge, and an ecological asset that requires additional direct financing.
6. **Cease incentivizing and privileging intensive, fossil-fuel-dependent livestock systems in policies.** Regulate livestock markets, investment and value-chain development to ensure that market engagement serves first and foremost to strengthen pastoralists' capacity to practice pastoralism, rather than driving sedentarization, production intensification, breed standardization or the fragmentation of rangelands.

7. **Give pastoralists the authority to conduct climate monitoring**, treating herders not as subjects of adaptation policy but as its co-authors, and recognizing cultural leaders as practitioners of the traditional techniques, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe on which that monitoring rests.
8. **Invest in young herders and heritage practitioners, who sustain the present and future of mobile pastoralism**, and address the conditions that drive them from pastoralism and towards cities, recognizing that a tradition of mobility broken in transmission cannot be revitalized by finance alone.
9. **Invest in the protection and promotion of sacred landscapes, cultural landscapes and tangible cultural heritage and cultural implements** by creating a mechanism that directly funds mobile pastoralism. Conduct impact assessments on sacred and cultural landscapes and other sites where cultural and natural values are closely interwoven.[16]
10. **Establish and enforce legal accountability, including criminal liability where warranted, for public and private entities that destroy, pollute or degrade rangeland-pastoralism systems** through mining, commercial agriculture, chemical contamination, waste dumping or other harmful activities. Apply the polluter-pays principle by requiring responsible entities to remove pollution and contaminants, restore affected landscapes, and compensate for harm to human and animal health and to rangeland-pastoralism systems.

The relationship between mobile pastoralist herders and their lands, pastures, water sources, sacred sites, and migration routes **must be recognized and protected as a cultural right**. Rangelands and pastoralism systems are not separate entities to be managed independently; they form a single, co-evolving system whose health rests on the interaction of mobility and variability. Funding land restoration while restricting the mobility that sustains it runs counter to the very outcome the UN Convention to Combat Desertification seeks.

We ask the Parties to remember that caring for the land is a sacred trust, and that the movements of pastoral peoples are among the oldest forms of that care. Supporting pastoralism to persist on its own terms is one of the most direct paths to combat desertification.

Presented on behalf of the participants of the "Nomadic Futures: Cultural Rights, Knowledge Systems, and Climate Resilience" conference.

Authors

Aiza Abdyrakhmanova, Aigine Cultural Research Center, Kyrgyzstan; Ariell Ahearn, University of Oxford, School of Geography; Qurbonidin Alamshoev, Institute of Culture and Information, Republic of Tajikistan; Gerelmaa Altangerel, Faculty of Education, University of Canberra, Australia; Meerim Aytkeeva, Aigine Cultural Research Center, Kyrgyzstan; Wassie Berhanu, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia; Sumiya Bilegsaikhan Taij, Independent scholar; Oyun-Erdene Chuluunbaatar, School of Public Policy, Chiang Mai University; James Correia, Asian Development Bank (ADB); Francisca Cortés Quezada, Universidad Autónoma de Chile; Cecilia Dal Zovo, School of Archaeology, University Of Oxford; Yuanhui Ding, Independent scholar; Anujin Erdenebayar, OI HERITAGE; Tamir Erdenechuluun, The National Legal Institute of Mongolia; Tamir Erdenetsogt, Word Media LLC; Hande Sinem Ergun, Marmara University, Türkiye; Natasha Fijn, Australian National University; Bruce Forbes, Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, Finland; Yufang Gao, Yale University InterAsia Initiative; Radhika Gupta, Before More is Lost; Carmen Hamel, University of Alberta; Chieko Hirota, JSPS / Australian National University; Baljinnyam Ishgen, Breathe Mongolia NGO; Dolgorsuren Jamiyan, Citi University, Mongolia; Akira Kamimura, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan; Mari Kazato, Hokusei Gakuen University / Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan; Wahid Khan, University of Oxford; Oyundelger Khurelpurev, Senckenberg Society for Nature Research; Ilse Köhler-Rollefson, League for Pastoralist Peoples; Shinya Konaka, University of Shizuoka, Japan; Saverio Krätli, IUAES Commission on Nomadic Peoples; Sarah Lunacek, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; Ganjargal M., Mongolian National University of Arts and Culture; Malahat Mazinani, Natural Resources and Watersheds Management Organization of Iran; Daniel J. Murphy, University of Cincinnati, USA; Oyundalai Odkhuu, National Chengchi University, Taiwan; Ruona Qi, Duke University; Bradley Rappa, Ithaca College; Khatansaikhan Ravdandorj, The National Legal Institute of Mongolia; Joana Roque de Pinho, Center for International Studies (CEI-Iscte), Portugal; Peregrine Rothman-Ostrow, University of Cambridge; Mijid Sainbuyan, Masaryk University; Meriam Sehimi, Delft University of Technology (TU Delft); Byamba Sharaa, National University of Mongolia; Nomynbayasgalan Suld, Mongolian Criminological Society; Jenny Tang, University of Cambridge; Moe Terao, Kanto Gakuin University; Eric Thrift, University of Winnipeg, Canada; Xiaojie Tian, University of Tsukuba; Lkhagvadulam Tumur-Ochir,

Mongolian National University of Arts and Culture; Tungalag Ulambayar, Zoological Society Luujin; Caroline Upton, University of Leicester, UK; Christopher Nelson Wizda, Independent researcher; Ganbold Yandag, Institute of Veterinary Pharmacology NGO; Sarantuyaa Zandaryaa, UNESCO Division of Water Sciences / Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme (IHP); Annah Lake Zhu, Wageningen University; Bumochir Dulam, National University of Mongolia; Tuvshintur Munkhtumen, Herder; Fernando García-Dory, World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples & Pastoralists; Byambajargal Ayushjav, Tsinghua University; Tsenguun Ganbat, Citi University; Bayarsaikhan Namsrai, Steps Without Borders NGO; Boldbaatar Nyamsuren, Herder; Molu Kulu, Spiritual leader; Hussein Isack, Kivulini Trust; Gufu Ibrae Ali, World Union of Indigenous Spiritual Practitioners; Buyanbadrakh Erdenetsogt, World Union of Indigenous Spiritual Practitioners; Mirrakhim Oposh, Artist, Kyrgyzstan; Aibek Baiymbetov, University of Central Asia; Tunga Rai, Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN); Zoljargal Enkhamgalan, University of Cambridge; Munkhtamir Damdinsuren, International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations; Anujin Baterdene, International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations; Batbuyan Batjav, Center for Nomadic Pastoralism Studies; Delgerzaya Delgerjargal, Reuters; Khand Byambaa, Herder; Orhon Myadar, University of Hawai'i; Dawn Chatty, University of Oxford; Munkhtuul Chuluunbaatar, International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations

Notes

1. UN Special Rapporteur report on mobile Indigenous Peoples (2024) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a79160-report-special-rapporteur-rights-indigenous-peoples-jose
2. League for Pastoralist Peoples (2024) https://www.pastoralpeoples.org/international-workshop-on-camelid-pastoralism/
3. Cultural Rights, Fribourg Declaration (2007) https://www.unifr.ch/ethique/fr/assets/public/Files/declaration-eng4.pdf
4. UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/unesco-universal-declaration-cultural-diversity

5. Dana Declaration on Mobile Peoples and Conservation (2002) https://danadeclaration.org/dana-declaration/

6. Dana + 20 Manifesto (2022) https://danadeclaration.org/dana-20-manifesto/

7. Statement on Nomadic Ethics and Intercultural Dialogue (2024) https://doi.org/10.67086/nsj.31.29

8. Global Declaration of Young Pastoralists (2026) https://iyrp.info/sites/default/files/documents/Declaration-ENG-Young-Pastoralists-short-version.pdf

9. Kathmandu Declaration of Pastoralist Women (2026) https://iyrp.info/sites/default/files/2026-08/Kathmandu-Declaration-Accepted-8-Aug-rev-15-Aug-highlights-removed.pdf

10. Nomads Red Line Initiative for Sustainable Pasture Rights (2026) https://www.wamaalliance.org/post/nomads-red-line-initiative-for-sustainable-pasture-rights

11. Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists

12. IYRP Policy Brief (2025) Powered by Variability: Rethinking Climate Policy for Pastoralism. https://iyrp.info/sites/default/files/2025-11/Policy-brief-Pastoralists-and-Climate-change_Final01112025_0.pdf

13. Potential funding sources include: Global Environment Facility (GEF), Green Climate Fund (GCF), Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) Fund, and other international and regional funding mechanisms.

14. See also: Rights and Resources Initiative (2026) Rights on the Move: A Practical Reform Guide on the Rights of Pastoralists and Mobile Peoples. https://rightsandresources.org/publication/rights-on-the-move/

15. *Spiritual impact assessment* refers to an evaluation of how a proposed project or land-use change affects a community's relationship to land — including sacred places, ancestral connections, ritual practices, and the intergenerational transmission of spiritual and traditional knowledge tied to place and mobility — and whether it strengthens or diminishes communities' spiritual agency and resilience.

16. UNESCO guidance on impact assessments in a World Heritage context, https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidance-toolkit-impact-assessments/