

Untangling the meanings of *sustainable cashmere*

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Dr. Eric Thrift, a socio-cultural anthropologist, is working with Mongolian goat herders and other stakeholders to investigate how ideas of *sustainability* are used – and contested – in cashmere commodity chains.

What is cashmere?

Cashmere is an exceptionally fine and soft natural fibre obtained from the down undercoat of goat breeds indigenous to Inner Asia.

Raw cashmere is supplied almost exclusively by Mongolian nomadic or semi-nomadic herders, for whom it provides a major source of cash income.

While cashmere continues to be associated with luxury fashion, cashmere sweaters are increasingly being marketed in North America as an affordable and sustainable clothing option.

What is the value of *sustainable cashmere*?

The need for ethical and sustainable clothing is shared by all Canadians, as our clothing choices can have major social and environmental impacts around the world.

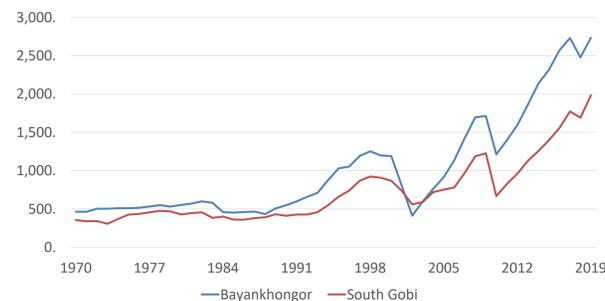
Cashmere offers several advantages to the ethical consumer:

- Cashmere is a durable organic textile produced from a renewable resource;
- Cashmere goats help maintain local biodiversity, as they are most often grazed extensively in small, mixed herds;
- The cashmere trade supports the livelihoods and culture of Indigenous Mongolian herders in Mongolia and China; and
- The cashmere processing industry offers a strong alternative to extractive resource-based development.

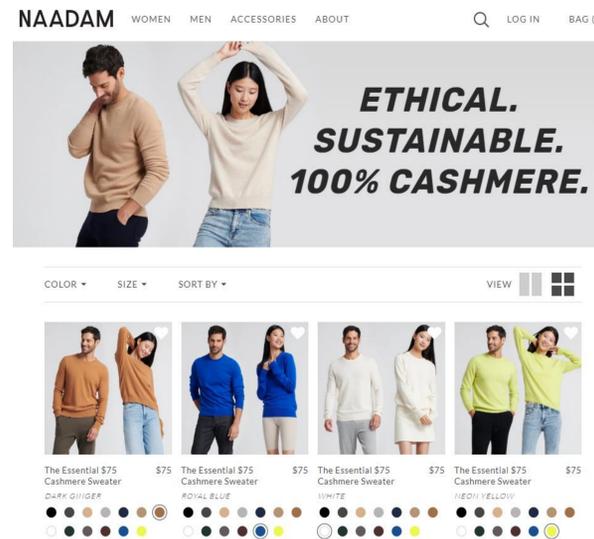
What is the problem?

Investment in cashmere production as a “sustainable growth” industry has led to the number of cashmere goats in Mongolia increasing fivefold over the past two decades. This has placed increased pressure on rangelands and contributing, by some accounts, to degradation of more than half the national territory.¹

North American consumers are confronted with reports asserting that cashmere is “ruining” or “decimating” Mongolia’s grasslands – and that global consumers now have an ethical obligation to demand (and pay for) “sustainably produced” cashmere.²



Number of goats in study sites (Bayankhongor and South Gobi provinces, Mongolia), 1970-2019, thousands. Data source: National Statistics Office of Mongolia, Data Table DT_NSO_1001_021V1



Screenshot from NAADAM Cashmere website. February 2, 2020. <https://naadam.co/collection/s/womens-75-dollar-sweater>

Combing cashmere goats, Yeroo sum, Mongolia (video stills). Eric Thrift / Mongolian Digital Ethnography Archive, #68f2a88c-3c9b-4899-9ff1-421b6c7245cf.



Ethnographic methods

To understand what sustainability means in different contexts, we are conducting ethnographic research among different actors in the cashmere trade – from goat herders, cashmere traders, and processors in Mongolia to designers, fair trade organizations, and consumers in Canada.

Involving interactive video among other tools, this is a collaborative form of research in which we attempt not only to document the standpoints of different stakeholders, but also to work together in creating new shared understandings of what sustainability can and should mean.

Notes

1. Bulgamaa Densambuu et al., *National Report on the Rangeland Health of Mongolia* (Swiss Agency for Development, Cooperation, 2018).
2. Kathleen McLaughlin, “Saving the Steppes,” *Science* 363, no. 6426 (February 2019): 446–47. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.363.6426.446>;
Rob Schmitz, “How Your Cashmere Sweater Is Decimating Mongolia’s Grasslands,” *NPR.org*, December 2016.
<https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/12/09/504118819/how-your-cashmere-sweater-is-decimating-mongolias-grasslands>; see also Jessica Davis, “Is Cashmere Bad for the Planet?” *Herper’s Bazaar*, January 2020. <https://www.harperbazaar.com/uk/fashion/fashion-news/30184355/how-sustainable-is-cashmere/>; Debbie Ng and Joel Berger, “The Hidden Cost of Cashmere,” *Forbes*, February 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/insideasia/2017/02/16/cashmere-cost-environment/>.

3. For example: NOYA Fibers, “Experience the Natural Difference – Sustainable Cashmere – Ethical Cashmere – Mongolian Cashmere,” 2019. <http://www.noyafibers.com/>; FRAME, “Sustainable Cashmere,” 2019. <https://frame-store.com/collections/sustainable-cashmere>.
4. Patagonia, “Recycled Cashmere,” 2019. <https://www.patagonia.ca/shop/recycled-cashmere/>; Stella McCartney, “Materials and Innovation: Cashmere,” 2020. <https://www.stellamccartney.com/experience/en/sustainability/themes/materials-and-innovation/cashmere/>.
5. Marion Hume, “Rio Tinto, NASA and Mongolian Goats: A Most Unlikely Fashion Story,” *Australian Financial Review*, April 2018. <https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/rio-tinto-nasa-and-mongolian-goats-a-most-unlikely-fashion-story-20180201-1h0npr>.
6. Joel Berger, Bayarbaatar Buuveibaatar, and Charudutt Mishra,

“Globalization of the Cashmere Market and the Decline of Large Mammals in Central Asia,” *Conservation Biology* 27, no. 4 (2013): 679–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12100>; Henrik von Wehrden et al., “Correlation of Trends in Cashmere Production and Declines of Large Wild Mammals: Response to Berger et al. 2013,” *Conservation Biology* 29, no. 1 (2015): 286–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12414>; Joel Berger, Bayarbaatar Buuveibaatar, and Charudutt Mishra, “The Cashmere Connection, Biodiversity, and Climate: Response to von Wehrden et al. 2014,” *Conservation Biology* 29, no. 1 (2015): 290–92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12415>; see also J. F. Derry and R. B. Boone, “Grazing Systems Are a Result of Equilibrium and Non-Equilibrium Dynamics,” *Journal of Arid Environments* 74, no. 2 (February 2010): 307–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaridenv.2009.07.010>.
7. International Monetary Fund, “Mongolia: Selected Issues,” 2019.

Three challenges

This research identifies three major challenges in defining sustainable cashmere.

(1) Sustainable cashmere indexes diverse concepts.

Although several clothing brands currently advertise *sustainable cashmere*, there is no shared definition of what actually makes a garment “sustainable”.

Cashmere retailers have indexed *sustainability* to a variety of positive attributes, both social (“ethical”, “responsibly produced”) and ecological (“eco-friendly”, “wildlife-friendly”).³ In some cases, *sustainability* means a refusal to use virgin fibres altogether.⁴

By establishing or partnering with rangeland management or conservation projects in Mongolia, several cashmere labels have also positioned *sustainability* as a form of capital “investment” in which consumers can readily participate.

Through association with technical assistance projects that claim to “rescue” herders and rangelands, however, *sustainable cashmere* also takes on the negative connotations of colonial salvation.⁵

(2) Defining sustainability is a political process.

Defining “sustainable” production levels is complicated by a lack of scientific and public consensus on the extent (or even the existence) of rangeland degradation due to overgrazing.⁶

Attempts to determine carrying capacities and implement rangeland management interventions are inherently political acts, as they privilege the perspectives of some actors but not others.

For example, international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank support ethical trade initiatives that emphasize “quality over quantity” and “convince herders to keep fewer goats.”⁷

Such market-based initiatives undermine the sovereignty of both local governance institutions and cashmere goat herders, insofar as these initiatives are controlled by international stakeholders, they position herder knowledge as misguided, and they are generally dissociated from local political discourse.

(3) The voices and concerns of cashmere suppliers are generally absent from global discourse on cashmere sustainability.

Mongolian herders describe *sustainability* with reference to several distinct political frames, including **mobility rights**, **autonomy**, and **cultural survival**.

Sustainability from the herder standpoint encompasses social and political factors that contribute to the survival of nomadic pastoralism as an overall system. These include:

- Rights to mobility and access to water and grazing areas
- Recognition of customary rights and practices
- Autonomy in natural resource management
- Protections against large-scale resource users (e.g., mining companies)
- Livelihood diversity

Many if not all of these sustainability concerns represent needs that demand political rather than technical approaches.

Significance

Our research indicates that *sustainable cashmere* is an ambiguous and politically contested term. Although we cannot provide easy solutions, our ethnographic work has the capacity to engage stakeholders in asking: *how can we design cashmere trade initiatives that accommodate a pluralistic understanding of sustainability?*