Erasing Tyre Tracks, Preserving Camel Trails: A Community-Led Destination Management Blueprint at the Flaming Cliffs

Bayanzag (Flaming Cliffs), Mongolia
Japan International Cooperation Agency
Protected Areas (including public natural or cultural parks)
Visitor Experience & Destination Management

Summary of Good Practice Story
Bayanzag, Mongolia's famous "Flaming Cliffs" where the first fossilised dinosaur eggs were found in 1923, is ancestrally revered by the 1,500 residents of Bulgan village as "Temeen Shavar" (Camel Cliffs) along a 5,000-year-old pastoral route — but a boom to over 35,000 annual visitors brought unregulated off-roading that damaged fossil layers and displaced wildlife, while outside operators pocketed all tourism revenue and even proposed ger camps atop the fragile cliffs. In 2018 residents formed the NGO Bayanzag-Flaming Cliffs Development Centre, which secured a landmark 2019 tripartite contract transferring custodial and enforcement powers to the community — now known nationally as "The Bulgan Model." The NGO enforced a 70-metre vehicle exclusion zone (while preserving traditional herders' animal-drawn transit), built a visitor centre and walking paths, piloted camelback trekking, and reinvested entry fees into local festivals and a junior ranger Eco-Club. The site now generates over $101,800 in annual self-sufficient revenue, employs 10 community members, and has seen the return of the endangered Saker Falcon and Pallas's Cat. The lesson: destination governance is an ongoing process of trust-building among stakeholders, not just imposing rules from outside.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context

At the intersection of prehistoric time and living nomadic heritage lies Bayanzag -internationally celebrated as the Flaming Cliffs. Located in the hyper-arid Mongolian Gobi Desert, this Cretaceous graveyard inscribed on the UNESCO Tentative List achieved global fame in 1923 when the world's first fossilised dinosaur eggs were unearthed.

Yet, for the 1,500 residents of Bulgan village, this sacred geography is ancestrally revered as "Temeen Shavar" (the Camel Cliffs), tracking over 5,000 years of pastoral adaptation along the Great Tea Route.

However, global mystique triggered an unmanaged commercial boom, with annual arrivals surging past 35,000, driven by international travellers. Trapped in a management vacuum due to its distance from the capital, the site suffered from chaotic, unregulated off-road driving, damaging fragile fossil-bearing layers, displacing native wildlife, and crushing Saxaul woodlands.

The breaking point arrived when developers proposed constructing commercial ger camps directly upon the vulnerable cliff edges, just as new regional infrastructure threatened catastrophic overcrowding. This is the story of how grassroots governance rescued a threatened wilderness, redefining the guest journey through sovereign, self-sufficient stewardship.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

Around 2017–2018, the Bulgan community reached a structural breaking point. Operating within a fragile national park territory, residents watched helplessly as chaotic, unmanaged tourism disrupted native flora and fauna. Their deepest resentment was severe economic leakage: affluent outside operators pocketed all tourism revenue, forcing locals to bear the compounding environmental degradation with zero financial benefit.

Tension peaked when these external commercial operators proposed permanent tourist camps directly upon the vulnerable cliff edges, threatening centuries-old livestock grazing paths. Realising that distant top-down oversight had completely failed to protect them, the community united under a fierce, collective conviction: they had to stop being victims of exploitation and become sovereign guardians of their own soil.

To halt this decline, residents established the NGO "Bayanzag-Flaming Cliffs Development Centre" in 2018. Led by local experts, the NGO aligned with the village assembly in 2019 to freeze cliff-top development. This milestone catalysed an institutional breakthrough that same year: a landmark tripartite site-management contract with the South Gobi prefecture and Bulgan village. Legally transferring custodial powers and enforcement rights to the community, this

mandate permanently blocked external commercial encroachment, establishing state-sanctioned local sovereignty.

The Vision: What you set out to do

The core vision was to protect the endangered landscape not through restrictive physical fencing, but by structurally fusing heritage conservation with traditional nomadic pastoralism. The strategy set out to blueprint a strict 70-metre vehicle exclusion perimeter around the fragile cliff edges and a ban on unregulated free camping, protecting formations without disrupting seasonal migration corridors.

Operationally, the destination envisaged 100% financial self-sufficiency. Driven by the NGO's breakthrough, this bottom-up framework was executed via a contract with Bulgan village in 2019, later recognised by the Ministry as "The Bulgan Model"-a benchmark for replication across other provinces to retain entry fees locally.

This closed-loop setup aimed to re-engineer travellers into active co-investors, building a kilometre-zero (Km0) value chain where herders retail handicrafts and organic produce, and funding pastoral festivals. Furthermore, the grand design positioned a purpose-built Visitor Centre as the threshold to restrict motorised vehicles, prompting guests to transition to pilot camelback trekking. Finally, by institutionalising long-term support for the school's "Altai Snowcock" Eco-Club, the vision sought to entrench grassroots stewardship within Bulgan's youth.

The Journey: How change happened

The transformation from an unmanaged transit corridor into a self-sustaining heritage site was executed through a sequential chain of adaptive actions, translating our core vision into physical reality:

Phase 1: Culturally Aligned Access Governance Authorised by official Bulgan village resolutions under the "Flaming Cliffs Cultural Management Plan 2018-2024," the community officially enforced a definitive Vehicle Exclusion Zone, permanently prohibiting motorised access within a 70-metre perimeter of the fragile cliff edge and banning unregulated free camping. Crucially, the boundaries explicitly permitted the unrestricted passage of traditional herders' horses, camels, and animal-drawn carts, allowing multiple informal car tracks to heal naturally while completely safeguarding ancestral pastoral mobility.

Phase 2: Infrastructure Development and Grassroots Stewardship Following the 2020 national site management contract, the NGO constructed the physical gateways defined in the grand design. Vulnerable dirt trails were replaced with a dedicated walking path built from durable materials to anchor pedestrian traffic. Concurrently, the NGO constructed the Bayanzag Visitor

and Information Centre in 2021 to act as the threshold for spatial control, restricting tourist cars to a designated parking lot.

To gradually activate the transport vision, the NGO introduced camelback trekking provided by herding families, operating as a seasonal pilot programme to test visitor readiness. This car-free environment created a safe space to activate youth stewardship. The school's Altai Snowcock Eco-Club became an active junior ranger network, executing seasonal spring and autumn cleanup campaigns and delivering environmental awareness to walking guests. To sustain this defence, the NGO provided logistical backing and meals for students, while enforcing a strict "What you bring in your vehicle must leave with your vehicle" waste policy.

Phase 3: Circular Supply Chains and Cultural Reinvestment This pedestrian zone and camel-led transport transformed the cliffs into a high-value asset, fulfilling the NGO-managed "Bulgan Model" circular economy. To retain wealth within local herders, the NGO employed 10 community members with fair, prioritised wages. This steady flow of responsible foot traffic integrated approximately 20 local residents selling handmade camel wool souvenirs directly into the walking path experience, alongside traditional dairy items and seasonal produce-including Bulgan's famous tomatoes-supplied to ger camps.

To deepen historical identity, the community utilised provincial funding to restore traditional camel caravan displays along the historic Great Tea Route, installing over a dozen camel statues and interpretive panels. Finally, the NGO transformed captured entry fees into a pillar of community well-being, reinvesting approximately 3,200 USD in 2025 to act as the primary financial sponsor for the annual Village Camel Festival, the autumn Harvest Festival, and the local Naadam games, locking tourism capital into the long-term survival of the nomadic steppe.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

By unifying community-enforced visitor management with the regional pastoral economy, the destination secured verifiable indicators of ecological, social, and financial prosperity:

- 100% Financial Autonomy: Operating independently of state subsidies or foreign donor funds, the NGO generated over 101,800 USD in annual entry revenues. This capital financed 100% of operations, secured wages for 10 full-time local staff, and funded vital green infrastructure—including eco-friendly bio-toilets and a community smart water well—alongside reinvesting approximately 3,200 USD directly into community cultural festivals.

- Ecological Chain Reaction: The 70-metre Vehicle Exclusion Zone restored critical silence to Bayanzag's immediate micro-ecosystem. As motorised noise vanished from the red formations, regenerated cliff flora stabilised small desert mammal populations, safely drawing native predators back; monitors documented the return of the elusive Pallas's Cat (Manul). Critically, on 29 March 2026, scientists formally recorded the active nesting of the endangered

Saker Falcon–Mongolia's national bird–directly upon the newly quieted cliff walls, proving the destination functions as a vital sanctuary.

- Socio-Emotional Empowerment: Retained tourism wealth transformed the residents' quality of life. One local female artisan increased her seasonal income by over 11,500 USD from selling handmade camel wool souvenirs. Embodying this deep generational shift, Bulgan's current Soum Governor–who once patrolled these cliffs as a child Eco-Club member clearing tourist litter–now proudly leads the legal defence against commercial developers, fiercely safeguarding their ancestral "Temeen Shavar" (Camel Cliffs) future.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

Our primary insight is that true destination governance is an ongoing process of social negotiation, not just enforcing rules. Our greatest initial challenge was friction with traditional camel herders who were fiercely defensive of their ancestral transit space and suspicious of new tourist restrictions. However, because our NGO shared local roots, we resolved this not through legal coercion, but via patient, peer-to-peer nomadic dialogue.

Furthermore, we learnt to navigate complex multi-level governance. When internal village politics stalled regulatory enforcement, we strategically engaged the South Gobi prefectural administration to create institutional momentum; conversely, we leveraged rapid village-level consensus to bypass slow provincial bureaucracy.

We discovered that destination management must move beyond its famous dinosaur palaeontology to encompass both human realities and the living flora and fauna. Our advice to others starting this path is simple: expect heavy friction. Do not rely on top-down decrees or outside experts. Build deep, multi-layered trust using local voices who speak the same cultural language, ensuring that the community feels like owners of the regulations, not victims of them.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

The grass-roots framework developed in Bulgan village has triggered a nationwide policy ripple effect. Officially recognised by the Ministry as "The Bulgan Model", it serves as Mongolia's national benchmark for self-sustaining governance, reshaping national green tourism strategies and featuring prominently within the "Go Mongolia" international campaign.

To advance this impact, the NGO partnered with the South Gobi prefectural administration to launch a 2026 public tender for a Scientific Carrying Capacity Assessment, expanding our local framework into a data-driven strategy. This provides a replicable blueprint for sensitive fossil sites and arid ecosystems worldwide.

Ultimately, this journey has instilled profound pride and sovereignty among our nomadic herders. Looking ahead, this initiative is scheduled for integration into the South Gobi

prefectural administration's 2027 fiscal budget, anchoring our joint push for UNESCO Global Geopark designation. The Flaming Cliffs will endure not as a scarred tourist corridor, but as a pristine, community-guarded wonder for generations to come.

Awards or Certifications

- UNESCO Tentative List Registry: Internationally recognized under the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List for its exceptional Cretaceous palaeontological and geological value (Inscribed in 2014).
- National Tourism Benchmark Designation: Formally recognised and certified by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of Mongolia as "The Bulgan Model" — the official leading national case study for self-sustaining grassroots destination governance.
- Tripartite Administrative Mandate: Backed by the official, legally binding site-management decree co-executed by the South Gobi Prefectural Administration, Bulgan Soum, and the NGO.
- International Academic Validation: Monitored and validated by palaeontological experts from the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) regarding visitor trail integration and fossil bed conservation standards.

Web Articles

International Press & Institutional Coverage (2026 AMNH Exhibition Launch): A collection of high-profile media features and official announcements from The New York Times, I LOVE NY, and the AMNH profiling the April 2026 "Fossils of the Flaming Cliffs" exhibition. These articles validate the site's global palaeontological prestige and the official heritage conservation MoU.

- https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/14/arts/design/american-natural-history-museum-fossils.html
- https://www.iloveny.com/thebeat/post/the-american-museum-of-natural-history-announces-fossils-of-the-flaming-cliffs/
- https://www.amnh.org/about/press-center/exhibition-announcement-fossils-flaming-cliffs

Other Relevant Links

AMNH Digital Palaeontological Archive: A curated collection of scientific articles detailing a century of dinosaur discoveries at the Flaming Cliffs, validating the global significance and geological fragility of the destination's fossil beds.

- https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/fossils-flaming-cliffs-gobi
- https://www.amnh.org/explore/videos/shelf-life/fossil-hunting-gobi-360/gobi-next-generation
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0B0bgvUu1E
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sc-n_hn8pE

UNESCO World Heritage Centre Data Zone: The official tentative list profile detailing the unique global value of the Flaming Cliffs.

https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5945/

Quotes or Testimonials

"Previously, tourist vehicles roamed aggressively, trampling ancestral 'Temeen Shavar' while outside operators took all wealth. Today, we run our NGO, enforce our rules, and have banned cars. Absolute silence has returned, camels walk peacefully, and being sovereign custodians is our community's greatest pride." – Local Herder & NGO Ranger Staff

"As an 'Altai Snowcock' Eco-Club alumnus and now elected Governor, I represent Bulgan's generational continuity. Childhood education translates directly into executive political action. When centralised oversight failed, our village solidarity allowed us to move at lightning speed to freeze cliff-top development, proving that investing in youth prepares tomorrow's leaders." – Bulgan eco-club alumnus governor

"In our Eco-Club, we protect this prehistoric home. Recording endangered Saker falcons nesting on newly quieted cliff walls this spring brought immense joy. Knowing our Governor started in this exact club inspires us deeply; we aren't just picking up litter, we are training to be the future guardians." – Secondary School Student & Junior Ranger

"Banning motorised vehicles from the fragile ridge was a masterstroke. Walking in absolute silence where dinosaur history was made, and transitioning to a slow, traditional camelback trek guided by herders, felt deeply authentic. The community's strict waste policy inspired us as international travellers to become active co-investors in preserving this timeless desert sanctuary." – International Conscious Traveller

"Managing an isolated heritage site like Bayanzag was a logistical impossibility under traditional top-down bureaucracy. The 'Bulgan Model' changed everything, delivering elite environmental enforcement and financial self-sufficiency. The prefecture is proud to officially integrate this initiative into our official 2027 fiscal budget, anchoring our joint push for UNESCO Global Geopark designation in 2027." – Senior Officer, South Gobi Prefectural Administration