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Scientists call for conservation of Ewenkis' Fading Culture

The indigenous Ewenki peoples of China traditionally practiced a reindeer herding system unique to the Siberian taiga forests. These traditional herding communities are now at the brink of extinction in the face of government policies that have restricted their ability to practice their traditional culture and lifestyle.

Ewenki communities were relocated in 1957, 1965, and 2003. In 1984, the household herding system replaced the collective reindeer herding system. After the 2003 relocation, in which reindeer were moved 280 km southward, the population declined abruptly. National and regional wildlife and forest protection programs, along with programs banning hunting for Ewenki herders have increased predation of young reindeer and overgrazing by herds of reindeer caught in a restricted migration pattern.

Currently, fewer than 100 Ewenki are directly or indirectly involved in reindeer herding, and fewer than 50 Ewenki regularly live in campsites. Across all Ewenki communities, there are no more than 40 people who can speak the traditional Ewenki language. Indigenous cultural practices have declined, including shamanistic performances, traditional medicinal use, and traditional dress, whereas the incidence of alcoholism has increased.

Some have called for a higher prioritization of the conservation of the reindeer and the Ewenki culture. The International Union for Conservation of Nature should correct their classification of the reindeer to reflect the current state of the reindeer's population and distribution. Reindeer in China should be recognized as "wildlife" or at least "semi domesticated wildlife" by the government and included in their list of protected species. Ecologically suitable nature reserves should be established encouraging all different functions necessary for conservation such as reintroduction and field-release, feralizing, herding culture conservation, and commercial ecotourism.

Compensation mechanisms should be put into place for the Ewenkis to compensate them for losses resulting from predation, climate change, and government activities that have compromised habitat due to timber production, and restricted foraging and seasonal migration due to land management policies. They should be provided paid positions as critical stakeholders in the management and conservation of reindeer, and the herding cultural system.