



A pastoral frontier: From chaos to capitalism and the re-colonisation of the Kazakh rangelands



Carol Kerven ^{a,*}, Sarah Robinson ^a, Roy Behnke ^a, Kanysh Kushenov ^b,
E.J. Milner-Gulland ^{a,c}

^a Department of Life Sciences, Silwood Park Campus, Imperial College London, UK

^b Kazakhstan Scientific Research Institute of Pasture and Livestock, Kazakhstan

^c Department of Zoology, Oxford University, Oxford, UK

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ABSTRACT

There is little research on pastoralists' responses to new expansion opportunities. We explore how pastoralists in Kazakhstan have responded to rapid, fundamental institutional and macroeconomic changes. We compare use patterns of grazing and water sites in two periods; 1999–2003, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the rural economy was in crisis and 2012–14, following a recovery in livestock numbers and a boost in the national economy. The study uses historical studies, formal surveys and anthropological interviews to document changes in livestock ownership, management and selection of pasture and water sites. In 2012–14, owners of the largest flocks had extended their grazing sites further away from the settled villages, moving away from more densely used sites more easily accessed in the 1990s. These new pastoral elites are colonising abandoned state-owned pastures and wells developed by Soviet state farms. Smaller-scale livestock owners based in villages are now less able to entrust their animals to larger-scale owners at remote desert sites, a change since the early post-Soviet period. The economic recovery of Kazakhstan has encouraged pioneering moves by entrepreneurial individuals, moves permitted by post-Soviet laws for privatised pasture land tenure. This expansionist movement parallels ecological patterns of site sequencing in wildlife.

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1. Introduction

The territorial expansion of commercial livestock production on an open frontier is a globally and historically significant process. Examples in the 19th century include Australian sheep stations (McMichael, 1984), American ranches (Osgood 1929), Argentine estancias (Strickon, 1965), or Botswana cattle posts (Peters, 1994) in the mid-20th century. Efforts by producers to assert exclusive control over natural resources are a recurrent feature of these frontier forms of market-orientated resource appropriation. Often the land tenure system goes through two phases – an initial period of informal exclusive ownership sanctioned by violence or local political processes (e.g. 'squatting', customary rights) followed by the legalization and registration of individual land rights (Osgood 1929). Contemporary developments on the Kazakh rangelands fit this pattern. The post-Soviet collapse of livestock populations and state

farms after Independence in 1991 created an open territorial niche consisting of pasture and wells abandoned by the Soviet state farms (Rus. *sovkhov*). There was a simultaneous adoption of a capitalistic economy based on the private acquisition of former state assets, including livestock, thus presenting an unusual combination of developments by the early 2000s – an expanding capitalist frontier in a semi-arid environment with extensive livestock production. This is referred by rural Kazakhs as 'the period of chaos'. A decade or so later, there has been a transition from 'chaos to capitalism,' including the formalization of land rights, the emergence of new pastoral elites and new systems of commercial livestock production.

This paper presents a case study from one rangeland area of Kazakhstan, comparing the changes in livestock distribution, management and ownership in two periods ten years apart (1999–2003 and 2012–2014). During this period there were major transformations in the institutional and economic conditions within which pastoral livestock are managed in the remote desert. Through comparison of two distinct time periods, we can draw inferences about the processes of expanding pasture territories under changing

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: carol_kerven@msn.com (C. Kerven).

circumstances. The comparison over time also allows us to detect any convergences between the patterns we observe and ecological predictions on animal movement that might still apply when humans have the dominant role in deciding where animals are distributed.

We present three propositions to explain the observed patterns:

The first is a temporally dynamic one – i.e. after enabling legal conditions occur, subsequent economic growth later stimulates some livestock owners to extend their pasture locations. This proposition concerns how the value and use of natural resource territories might be redefined under a pastoral livestock system: Shifts from open access to exclusive resource use will (a) be facilitated by enabling legal conditions but (b) will actually occur only when the increased commercial value of pastoral output warrants the private appropriation of productive resources. The second proposition concerns the type of people who will take advantage of these temporal changes. It relates directly to the role of human agency in diverting or directing access by livestock to optimal natural resources: Entrepreneurial individuals who colonize new areas have distinctive socio-economic profiles that give them the confidence to creatively reinterpret their legal rights in order to defend their privileged positions.

The attributes that make these entrepreneurs innovators within their own communities – high levels of livestock wealth, risk taking personalities and the command over a core of male kinsmen (brothers or sons) – may also equip them for success in the new world of commercial profit and private property. These dominant personalities may therefore be among the first to defect from older forms of community solidarity, which collapse when the costs start to outweigh the benefits to a new livestock elite. The research explores the resources and incentives that encourage certain individuals to act as agents of legal, economic and technical change, by taking advantage of new opportunities.

The third proposition is that there is a noticeable sequential occupation of sites which may be more suitable for livestock, though more costly for people to access, as earlier-occupied sites which had certain biophysical disadvantages, have become full up and may be overused. Sequential site occupation in low density populations has been well-studied for a variety of animal populations and habitats (e.g. Houston and Lang, 1998; Greene and Stamps, 2001; van Beest et al., 2014). Here we consider whether some of these ecological principles are relevant to understanding how pastoralists manage domestic livestock.

Predictions may be made concerning the sequencing of site selection where the resource user and resource are not at equilibrium. In this case where an initially low number of livestock are now expanding into the area available, these predictions apply to human decision-making, and may include (from Winterhalder et al., 2010):

- (i) As total population grows, habitats will be settled in order of decreasing suitability;
- (ii) The site ranked second will not be settled until its basic suitability is matched by the (declining) suitability of the first-ranked site.

Settlers were familiar with the suitability of the habitats they were about to occupy and, we might predict, they established residential sites in an orderly process of adaptive decision-making: Settle first in the most salubrious location. When, with growing exploitation or crowding, its resources were depressed and its value declined to match the next-ranked locale, establish a new settlement there (Winterhalder et al., 2010: 469).

2. Scope and aims

The paper seeks to explain how the perception of site suitability –

in effect what defines a “salubrious location” – has been altered by two main push–pull effects: (a) the most accessible (and thus cheapest) sites often with poor quality water becoming filled up over time, while (b) due to growing prosperity, the attractiveness has increased of previously abandoned, more remote sites with better quality water and pasture, but more expensive to access. By the end of the second period, the livestock population of the study site was still only about 20% of the former livestock population kept by the Soviet farms on the rangelands by the end of the 1980s (Behnke, 2003; Robinson and Milner-Gulland, 2003b; Alimaev and Behnke, 2008). Hence much of the better pasture is still relatively unoccupied. We consider how changed external circumstances lead to shifts in how costs and benefits are evaluated by the protagonists.

Our explanation will proceed in three stages corresponding to our propositions: (a) identification of the enabling factors (economic, legal and technological) that encouraged expansion in the 2003–12 period; (b) a description of the emergence of a new rural capitalist elite and the stagnating situation of those left behind; (c) finally, an explanation of the geographical pattern of expansion – the sequencing of well occupation with the creation of new livestock enterprises or the expansion of old ones.

3. Methods

Field research used social anthropological approaches to elicit some of the complex management practices used by pastoralists, currently and in the recent past, for gaining access to key resources for raising livestock in the study area. In two small desert settlements (respectively containing 250 families and 87 families in 2012), 167 open-ended interviews were conducted with 97 individuals (many interviewed more than once), in five field work periods in 2012–2014; April and October 2012, April and June 2013 and March–April 2014.

The respondents were familiar with the international and national research team members, who had previously conducted fieldwork in this same study area between 2000 and 2005. The researchers stayed in pastoralists' family homes, which generated opportunities for unexpected lines of enquiry to arise informally. Interviews were open-ended but followed a check list of central questions. The aim of the interviews was to uncover livestock keepers' changing motives over time, in selecting pasture and water locations for their livestock. Whenever a respondent brought up a spontaneous explanation, such as the lowering cost of fuel for vehicles or the informal approaches for gaining access to disused wells, they were encouraged to elaborate on these topics. Interviews were discursive and conversational, and often raised secondary and tertiary lines of enquiry. New topics introduced by respondents were also followed up in subsequent interviews with other respondents.

Notes were taken in each interview, with the respondent's prior permission, and were recorded verbatim in English translation, as a Kazakh interpreter was used. Interviews were conducted in people's homes or on the open rangelands, and not all topics were asked in a single interview, as repeat visits were often made. Interviews could last a minimum of 30 min and up to 3 h or more, depending on the respondent's loquaciousness and leisure time at their disposal.

The central questions included:

- Brief life history of family from the period of the Soviet livestock collective (*sovkhos*) to the present.
- Main assets currently owned, including species of livestock and mechanical equipment such as vehicles and pumps for wells.
- Current and past employment as well as other income sources of family head and spouse as well as adult offspring still assisting parents with labour or money.

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