

The Itgel Foundation

The Itgel Foundation is a nonprofit organization that conducts charitable projects in Mongolia among rural herding communities. Our projects include health, education, livelihoods, environment, and other initiatives designed to promote sustainable development among poor and marginalized communities. This work requires that we spend our time in some of the most remote corners of the globe, notably the border of Mongolia and Siberia in the rugged Sayan Mountains, home to the Tsaatan reindeer-herding community with whom we work. In this mountainous border region there is no electricity, no running water, and certainly no access to cell phones or internet. When it comes to communication, the only option is satellite phone.

Since 2007, Preferred Communications has supported The Itgel Foundation through sponsorship of a satellite phone unit for our teams in Mongolia. This phone has served as a vital lifeline for our organization, allowing us to call for medical assistance in the event of emergencies and stay in touch with our head office in the capital city. The phone has also enabled the impoverished Tsaatan community to engage in small business development related to tourism by allowing them to connect with tour operators and intending visitors, coordinate logistics, and arrange payments. Such activities have facilitated unprecedented economic growth in the community, and would not have been possible without the reliability and range of satellite communications. But of all the ways and situations in which our satellite phone has proved indispensable, the following story stands out.

As part of Itgel's ongoing health initiatives, we assemble teams of scientists to visit the Tsaatan in order to conduct research and treatments on infectious diseases that affect the community and the domesticated reindeer on which they depend. In the spring of 2008, our team included three American scientists who had traveled across the globe to provide health services, along with myself, the director of the organization. As always, we obtained permission for our fieldwork from the Ministry of Agriculture and other relevant authorities in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, before heading 800 km north via Russian jeep to our remote field site. After the usual four days of non-stop, spine-numbing driving, we arrived in the country's northernmost village of Tsagaan Nuur, which is situated on Mongolia's border with Russia. Later that day we set out on horse into the rugged mountains where the Tsaatan live and herd reindeer. But not long into our ride, we were apprehended by border protection officials who told us we could not continue because we lacked permission from the Ministry and from the Border Protection Authority of Mongolia. We explained that we did have permission, and the officials set off to find their superiors in order to determine how to proceed.

Later that day, six senior officers, armed with AK-47s returned to inform us that we were being removed from the area immediately, and would be arrested if we did not cooperate. We were told that no notification of our work had been received from the far-away Ministry, nor from the central Border Protection Authority office. Indeed the absence of phone, fax, and internet in the village made it nearly impossible to transmit such authorizations from the capital. As such, we were informed that we were in violation of the law for conducting sensitive research in a border area without approval, the consequences of which were severe. It seemed our entire project was about to come to a crashing halt, and the investments in our professional team, equipment, and logistics all lost. That is, if we had not had a satellite phone.

With tension mounting and a potentially imminent arrest, I asked the officer if I could call the Ministry of Agriculture and the central office of the Border Protection Authority to confirm our authorization. He looked at me as though I was crazy, knowing that there were no phones in the area. Much to his surprise, I pulled out an Iridium sat phone unit from the saddle bag on my horse, and started to dial. There in the mountains of northern Mongolia, standing in a dense forest more than 50 km from the closest land line, and 200 km away from the nearest source of electricity, I made a clear connection with the Ministry, and handed the phone over to the border officer. He had a series of conversations with

state agriculture and border patrol officials, and then handed the phone back to me and nodded in approval. The officers loaded up their gear and departed the area, saying we had permission to continue. Within minutes, a potentially disastrous situation had been transformed into a moment of technological amazement and great relief. Without the sat phone, our team likely would have been arrested, and our fieldwork would have been prevented. The costs of this would have been enormous, particularly for a small organization our size. But more importantly, the Tsaatan would not have benefited from the health projects we were there to conduct.

This occasion, like many others over the course of our partnership with Preferred Communications, represents the value of satellite communications. In fact, our team never travels to the field anymore without a sat phone tucked into a backpack or on the saddle bag of a horse. Without it, the potential for disaster is significant. With it, we know that help is never far away.

**Morgan Keay, Executive Director
The Itgel Foundation**