

Mongolian monks studying Montana's mining successes

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After the peaceful democratic revolution in Mongolia in 1990 and the country's release from communism, the country's mining industry escalated.

Venerable Bataar Tumurbaatar is in charge of foreign affairs and the environment at the Gandanpunchogchin Monastery in the Uvurhangay Province of Mongolia. He told the Chronicle through a translator Wednesday that mining started in his area in the center of the country about 15 years ago.

"It was a time when the community didn't know much about mining and its impact," he said.

The result was irresponsible mining which dried out rivers and caused serious soil erosion in areas.

"For the past 15 years it has gotten worse," Tumurbaatar said. "I hope it's still not too late to fix this."

Tumurbaatar and members of the Tributary Fund's 2011 Environmental Education Exchange – three Buddhist monks and an environmental educator from Mongolia – will give a presentation at the Bozeman Public Library at 7 p.m. tonight.

The presentations will focus on the current state of mining as well as conservation efforts through monasteries and schools in Mongolia.

Through The Tributary Fund, which helps faith leaders with conservation efforts in Mongolia, Tumurbaatar is learning from the mistakes and successes of mining programs in Montana.

"Monks are highly esteemed in Mongolia," said Claire Sands Baker, community relations director with The Tributary Fund. "People are much more likely to listen to monks than rangers or educators or politicians."

The fledgling mining industry in Mongolia has focused on extraction without repercussion.

"They want to mine everything and extract anything," said Chingma Luvsandash, who coordinates mining education training with Mongolia's monastic body for The Tributary Fund. "But they have enough money to work with communities."

Luvsandash said changes are being made to Mongolia's mining laws, but there is still much to learn.

The group toured the toxic Berkeley Pit and visited Stillwater and Golden Sunlight mines, where Tumurbaatar said he saw mining with minimal environmental impact.

"I've learned a lot about this possibility mining can be conducted in a right way," with community support, he said.

This is the third cultural exchange. The first focused on wildlife management and the second on environmental curriculum in schools. The other delegates are the Venerable Amarbold Dondog, the secretary of environmental affairs at Mongolia's lean monastery, and the Venerable Tsambanurdev Namsrai.

For more information, visit thetributaryfund.org.

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