Mongolia’s ecology and environment lend themselves to different, yet overlapping, categories. For instance, one may define Mongolia’s regions by mountain chains: the Khangai region (central-western Mongolia); the Khentii region (central-northeastern Mongolia); the Altai region (south-southwest); and the Sayan region (along the northern border with Russia). Or, one may instead use the convenient distinctions of vegetation zones: taiga in the north; mountain-forest-steppe (north-central); steppe (central); and desert-steppe and desert (southern tier). In terms of livestock herding, Mongolia’s pasturelands may be divided into five zones: the Khangai-Khövsgöl forested mountain region of the northwest; the Selenge-Onon Rivers region of north-central Mongolia; the high Altai Mountain zone; the central-eastern steppe lands; and the desert and steppe region of the Gobi. Each of these five zones supports different mixtures of herd animals.¹ Whichever geographic categorization one uses, all these ecosystems overlap, but generally run as lateral bands across a map of Mongolia.

Distinctions in geography, vegetation, access to water, and climate all affect how nomads use the land. These distinctions also make generalizations a bit difficult when we look more closely at widely divergent patterns of nomadic migration, the varied composition of herds, and the degree to which herders may or may not be connected to larger economic and marketing networks. Rather than homogenize significant
variations, this chapter will explore the diversity of Mongolia’s natural world and the accommodations that humans have had to make to exist in oftentimes difficult circumstances.

**The Gobi: Exceptionalism and Extremes**

For many people, the Gobi is so tightly interwoven with the image of the “real Mongolia” that it may seem odd to refer to Gobi exceptionalism. Yet, everything about life in the Gobi—for humans as well as for herd animals—is defined by extremes and exceptions. While the pastoral nomadic way of life encounters enormous challenges throughout Mongolia, nowhere is it so demanding as in the cold desert environment of the Gobi.

The Gobi desert in its entirety encompasses some 390,000 square miles, constituting about one-third of Mongolia’s southern regions as well as extended regions of Inner Mongolia in China’s north. It is a pebbly, rock-strewn desert with sparse but nutritious vegetation for herd animals. Only about 3 percent of the Gobi in Mongolia consists of sand, yet its tall, windswept sand dunes covering an area of over 900 kilometers at Khongoryn Els in Gobi Gurvansaikhan National Park invariably leave stunning impressions upon visitors.

As a cold northerly desert, the Gobi’s harshness is felt most in winter when temperatures may plunge to −40 degrees Fahrenheit and are often accompanied by ferocious northerly winds. Fall and spring in the Gobi also witness great winds with dust storms common in the spring months. Sands from the Gobi end up clouding the skies over Beijing in March and April, and contribute to respiratory problems.

In summertime, the challenge is finding water, with annual precipitation averaging less than four inches. Shallow wells at only eight- to ten-feet deep historically have allowed for extensive grazing of herd animals in Gobi regions, although migrations from pasture to pasture were and continue to be of necessity more numerous in the Gobi than elsewhere in Mongolia. In postsocialist Mongolia, however, water availability and access have become critical issues. After the collapse of the socialist-era negdel (“socialist collective”) system, most wells constructed in that period fell into disrepair through neglect and vandalism. Many of these wells were drilled to depths ranging from 30 to over 200 feet,