

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY.....	II
ZUSAMMENFASSUNG	VI
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	XI
LIST OF FIGURES	XV
LIST OF TABLES	XIX
GLOSSARY	XX
1. INTRODUCTION, STATE OF THE ART AND OBJECTIVES	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 State of the art and objectives.....	2
2. MATERIALS AND METHODS.....	9
2.1 Study area	9
2.1.1 Location and Climate	9
2.1.3 Geology	10
2.1.4 Soils	11
2.1.5 Ecological units and vegetation.....	15
2.2 Past and present land use	18
2.2.1 Traditional nomadic pastoralism.....	18
2.2.2 Intensification of grazing management in the 20 th century	21
2.3 Plot description, sampling design and analytical approach.....	23
2.3.1 Continuously grazed and ungrazed experimental plots.....	23
2.3.2 Large scale assessment of SOM distribution.....	25
2.3.3 Controlled grazing experiment.....	26
2.4 Soil chemical and physical analyses.....	28
2.4.1 Bulk density, water holding capacity, pH values, organic and inorganic carbon, total nitrogen and sulphur and carbon isotope ratios.....	28
2.4.2 Particle size distribution	29

2.4.3 Physical fractionation	30
2.4.4 Soil respiration	31
2.4.5 Aggregate stability, precompression stress and soil compaction	31
2.5 Statistical and geostatistical analyses	32
2.5.1 Basic statistical analyses	32
2.5.2 Digital soil mapping methods.....	32
2.5.2.1 Classification and Regression Trees	33
2.5.2.2 Random Forest	33
2.5.3 Statistical validation	35
2.5.4 Geostatistical calculations	35
3. DEGRADATION AND SMALL-SCALE SPATIAL HOMOGENIZATION OF INTENSIVELY-GRAZED STEPPE SOILS	38
3.1 Results	38
3.1.1 Soil properties and the amount of SOM	38
3.1.2 Spatial distribution of topsoil properties at the field scale	40
3.1.3 Spatial distribution of topsoil properties at the plant scale	43
3.2 Discussion.....	45
3.2.1 Degradation of SOM in grazed <i>Stipa</i> and <i>Leymus</i> dominated steppe types.....	45
3.2.2 Formation of small-scale spatial heterogeneity of topsoils at ungrazed steppes...	46
3.2.3 Spatial homogenization due to grazing and ecosystem stability	51
3.3 Conclusions	52
4. DIGITAL MAPPING OF SOM STOCKS USING RANDOM FOREST MODELING IN A SEMI-ARID STEPPE ECOSYSTEM	54
4.1 Results	54
4.1.1 Soil properties.....	54
4.1.2 RF model performance and validation of the prediction maps	55
4.1.3 Importance of predictor variables.....	57
4.1.4 Spatial prediction of elemental stocks under different land use classes.....	60

4.2 Discussion.....	62
4.2.1 Evaluation of the DSM approach	62
4.2.2 Environmental variables controlling the distribution of SOM	64
4.2.3 Land use related elemental stocks	65
4.3 Conclusions	67
5. AGGREGATE STABILITY AND PHYSICAL PROTECTION OF SOIL ORGANIC CARBON IN SEMI-ARID STEPPE SOILS	68
5.1 Results	68
5.1.1 Basic chemical and physical soil properties	68
5.1.2 Soil fractions.....	69
5.1.3 Macroaggregate stability	72
5.1.4 SOM mineralization	73
5.2 Discussion.....	75
5.2.1 Physical protection of SOC and the impact of grazing	75
5.2.2 Aggregate stability and physical SOC protection	76
5.3 Conclusions	79
6. ASSESSMENT OF SENSITIVE SOIL AND VEGETATION PARAMETERS FOR BEGINNING STEPPE DEGRADATION.....	80
6.1 Results	80
6.1.1 Soil parameters	80
6.1.2 Vegetation parameters	83
6.2 Discussion.....	84
6.2.1 Applicability of soil parameters as indicators for beginning steppe degradation .	84
6.2.2 Sensitivity of vegetation parameters	85
6.3 Conclusions	87
7. MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK	89
8. REFERENCES	90
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT/DANKSAGUNG	107

PUBLIKATIONEN UND PRÄSENTATIONEN	109
LEBENSLAUF	111