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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 28(1) : 26-31

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.0972

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Mountain Research and Development Vol 28 No 1 Feb 2008: 26–31 doi:10.1659/mrd.0972

J. Marc Foggin

Depopulating the Tibetan Grasslands

National Policies and Perspectives for the Future of Tibetan Herders in Qinghai Province, China

Tibetan grasslands constitute one of the most important grazing ecosystems in the world. Distributed widely across the high plains and mountains of the Tibetan plateau, these grasslands encompass the source areas of many major Asian rivers. Around 40 percent of the world's population depends on, or is influenced by, these rivers. Tibetan grasslands also support a unique assemblage of flora and fauna with many rare and endemic species. A variety of government policies have been applied in recent years to protect the ecology and biodiversity of China's grasslands. There is growing concern, though, that national and global economic considerations have overshadowed emerging conservation agendas. Additionally, the social dimensions of these policies deserve more attention than they have received to date. The present article critically reviews several key policies affecting pastoralists, with special attention given to the Sanjiangyuan region of Qinghai Province. Plateau Perspectives, an international NGO, has worked in this region for nearly a decade, promoting a more people-centered approach to conservation and development, thus giving a voice to local Tibetan pastoral communities.

A traditional world facing globalization

Globalization is a worldwide increase in interconnectivity and interdependence socially, culturally, environmentally, economically, and politically. It has introduced a shrinking of virtual space whereby the activities of previously isolated or autonomous groups are impacted by those living far from the affected area. A major component or accelerating factor caused by globalization is the movement of the world's population towards cities. However, many indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities within a geo-political nation-state often have little say in choosing the terms on which they wish to engage with the "outside world." This is the case for Tibetan people living on the high grasslands of western China. In this region the major vehicle of change/globalization is Chinese (national) policy, and the global trend toward urbanization now presents local people with both a massive cultural shift and an intentional development goal set by national decision-makers situated physically and culturally outside of their local communities.

China has entered the global era at unprecedented speed, including membership of the WTO, and it is now well interconnected with the rest of the world. While the effects of globalization at first were felt mostly in the more developed coastal (eastern) region of China, now even the remotest inland (western) regions are impacted as well. Following the demise of collectivism and the subsequent introduction of a market-oriented economy in the early 1980s, it was long assumed that an economic cascade (or a trickle-down, trickle-west effect) would occur naturally. Even before the turn of the millennium, however, it was abundantly clear to the country's leaders that economic and social divides between east and west were growing at an unhealthy rate, and this led to concern about the possibility of social unrest, especially in ethnic minority and border regions. For this reason, the Western Development Strategy was begun in 2000 (also known as China's campaign to "Open Up the West") with the aim of building infrastructure and telecommunications, improving people's living conditions, and protecting the environment. This broad approach to regional development has continued at a phenomenal pace ever since, radically changing both human and natural landscapes through construction programs and new forms of land use. While this strategy may begin to address some of the long-standing challenges associated with poverty, at the same time other rural development challenges are emerging as a result of differing definitions of development and contrasting aspirations for the future.

Situated in the center of the Tibetan plateau, the Sanjiangyuan region of Qinghai includes the headwaters of 3 major Asian rivers: the Yellow, Yangtze, and Mekong. Traditional pastoralism, and to a lesser extent subsistence hunting, have been practiced in this high-alti-

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tude, fragile ecosystem for over 5000 years (Figure 1). Since 2000, when the Western Development Strategy began, China and the world have come to recognize the global importance of the Tibetan plateau region both as a "water tower" with downstream influence on approximately 40% of the world's population, and as a geographic region with a unique natural and cultural heritage. In practice, however, both national and provincial emphases have been primarily on conservation matters, including the establishment in 2003 of the second largest nature reserve in the world. In many instances the socio-cultural impact has been dramatic (eg resettlement villages, a result of the "Ecological Migration" policy), demanding much of local people including change/loss of livelihoods and breakdown of community ties.

Whether considered from the perspective of traditional Chinese culture or a Socialist-Marxist ideology, extensive pastoralism generally has been viewed as a backward, undeveloped, or unproductive form of livelihood. It often has been assumed—wrongly—to demand little in terms of labor or thought as compared, for example, to lowland Chinese farming systems. On the contrary, the ecological knowledge and traditional management expertise of Tibetan herders are based on a long history of survival, and sometimes even prosperity, in the high grasslands. Herders have long been engaged not only in livestock holding, mostly yak and sheep, but also in a variety of other occupations including subsistence hunting, transport, and trade as a means of diversifying their income and minimizing risk in the harsh, often unpredictable environment. Since the turn of the 21st century, though, a variety of large-scale, broad-reaching changes have begun to take place, sometimes imposed; these will soon lead to irreversible social consequences.

Following a move in the 1980s to *not* intercede with newly emerging market forces—a decision that itself began a process of economic globalization even in the remotest parts of the country—several other strategic decisions also have been made at high government levels to integrate all regions of China, including ethnic minority areas such as the Sanjiangyuan region, within a centrally planned system. From a social perspective (ie from the pastoralists' point of view) anything beyond



FIGURE 1 Pastoral landscape near the center of the Tibetan plateau. (Photo by author)

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FIGURE 2 The "Four-Way Scheme" policy: a winter house, livestock shelter, fence (wall), and winter fodder are shown here, along with a traditional tent in the foreground. (Photo by author)



the "local" (eg township or county level) is seen as "the outside world." Yet despite this, nearly all Tibetan herders are now being swept along in China's rapid pace of globalization, with increasing economic interdependence, cross-cultural influences, and integration into broader geopolitical, social, environmental, and other spheres.

FIGURE 3 The "Rangeland to Grassland" policy: fencing is now being erected over vast areas of high-altitude grasslands. (Photo by author)



National policies affecting Tibetan grassland areas

A government policy aimed to alleviate poverty in rural Qinghai was begun in the mid- to late-1990s called the "Four-Way Scheme" (*sipeitao*). The "four ways" were to subsidize the building of houses for herders (for them to use instead of tents), subsidize shelters for livestock (to improve the over-winter survival of domestic livestock), erect fences (to improve efficiency and to "rationalize" animal husbandry), and grow additional fodder (also to enhance over-winter survival of livestock) (Figure 2). Following a long-term, multigenerational trend from tribal feudalism to collectivism to quasi-privatization of land and livestock from the 1950s to the mid-1980s, this approach to poverty alleviation introduced, possibly inadvertently, the next major step in a fairly rapid transition from a rural "nomadic" lifestyle toward the increased sedentarization of a people. This has led to a decrease in seasonal mobility and flexibility within livestock management practices, both of which have been essential components of Tibetan nomadic pastoralism for centuries. Such quasi-privatization of land, along with increased sedentarization, may not result in positive long-term resource management outcomes.

As the Western Development Strategy began, the first priority program to be adopted and implemented was the "Grain to Green" policy (also called "Farmland to Forest" policy; *tuigeng huanlin*), a nationwide environmental restoration program. In grassland areas it is known as the "Rangeland to Grassland" policy (*tuimu huancao*) (Figure 3). The basic premise of this policy is that a decade of respite from livestock grazing is necessary for degraded grassland to be restored to its natural state, and therefore domestic livestock (and herders) should be moved away. However this premise remains untested at such large scales, and most grassland systems have in fact evolved over time as grazed ecosystems, with either wild or domestic grazers. Now, tens of thousands

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FIGURE 4 The "Ecological Migration" policy: many new resettlement villages are being built across the Tibetan plateau. (Photo by author)

of families have been asked to move off the grassland and to adopt new livelihoods in farming or to live in new towns. In Qinghai, for example, 35 resettlement communities have already been built and 51 more are under construction. In 2007 a total of 61,899 herdsmen from 13,305 households will be resettled.

According to government plans, over 100,000 people (ie, 17% of the population) will be relocated from the Sanjiangyuan region by 2010 with the aim of restoring the grassland ecosystem. However, this transition is not proving to be easy and relatively little support has been given in the process. New housing often is basic, lacks sanitation and running water, and economic opportunities for the new arrivals are limited or non-existent. Furthermore, in the rural grassland areas, new fencing is being transported and erected at an unprecedented rate, leaving any future potential returnee with fewer grassland resource management options than ever.

While the above policy continues, it has been overshadowed recently by an even more dramatic attempt to protect the ecology and biodiversity of the headwaters of the Yellow, Yangtze, and Mekong rivers. "Ecological Migration" (*shengtai yimin*) is now in full swing in the grasslands of the Sanjiangyuan region. This policy seeks to relocate more permanently a large segment of the (former) herding population into new towns (Figure 4). There are two main rationales invoked to support this policy, one environmental and one development-oriented. Either way, a potential major social consequence is the creation of inner city-type problems even in small rural towns. Such problems include the concentration of poverty, high levels of unemployment, and increased dependency on the state for subsistence. Some resettlement villages are already being called "theft schools."

The first argument in support of urbanization under the "Ecological Migration" plan is that herders are assumed to have played a major role, through overgrazing, in the recent degradation of the natural environment. Secondly, there is an apparent bias toward farming and towns, as opposed to pastoralism and rural living, that seems to have led many decision-makers to address the development matter of providing social services (especially health care and education) by focusing efforts mainly on the process of urbanization, with an implicit assumption that there will then be a direct consequent improvement for all people, including new residents, irrespective of their success at adapting to new living conditions and economic opportunities. However, what has already been reported indicates that the social consequences of urbanization may outweigh the hoped-for benefits. Additionally, the prior history of such relocation/migration ventures—as seen for example in native American reservations in the USA, First Nations in Canada, and aboriginal reservations in Australia—gives clear cause for concern.

Finally, the most recent national policy to impact the lives of pastoralists in wide-ranging ways is the full application in 2007 of the long-standing 9-year compulsory education law. Under this law, all children between the ages of 7 and 11 are required to begin primary education, and once a child has been enrolled in school,

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"Urbanization is a worldwide trend that can greatly [enhance] an economy, and it will … narrow the gap between [Tibetan areas and] the prosperous coastal region [of China]." (A sociologist at the Tibet Studies Institute in Sichuan Province)

s/he must complete 9 years of education. With risk of fines or other serious consequences for herders who do not comply, and government leaders risking demotion if the education law is not applied in full, many families in pastoral areas now must move to town to provide their children with a home while they attend school. Families who have relatives in town may entrust their children to their care, but those lacking relatives in town have little choice but to move. Such families are therefore forced by circumstances to sell their livestock in order to build a house and to subsist in town. Even more seriously, it will be nearly impossible for these families, several years in the future, to return to their previous way of life once their children graduate. Thus this policy, too, leads to greater urbanization of Tibetan herders.

The rapid pace of urbanization seen throughout western China, while argued most often from a well-developed environmental rhetoric, is also the result of a national perception that urban life is inherently better than life in the countryside. With such views held in influential circles, it is easy to see how globalization can have a large impact even at the local level. Fortunately such views are not universally held. Nonetheless, the speed and apparent resolve with which such sociocultural and development transitions are being introduced in grassland areas do raise the important question whether there is any other way by which so-called "sustainable development" (and biodiversity conservation) can come effectively to the Tibetan grasslands before all alternative doors are closed, perhaps permanently.

A contrasting and more people-centered approach to conservation and development is presented below, drawing on nearly 10 years' experience of active collaboration with local communities, NGOs, and government authorities in the headwaters of the Yangtze River.

A way forward: Community co-management in the Sanjiangyuan region

The Sanjiangyuan region is at a crossroads. Development of this region will either incorporate the needs of the local people—Tibetan herders—or it will seek to protect the environment by removing many of them to new towns and suburbs, asking them to change livelihoods. The Yangtze River Headwaters Sustainable Development Project—a collaborative development project of Plateau Perspectives, the Upper Yangtze Organization, and the Government of Zhiduo County—has demonstrated that genuine community participation and ownership of development and conservation efforts are possible.

From 2003 to the present, this project has helped improve access to, and quality of, health care and education in extensive grassland areas through training courses and the construction of village schools and health centers. New economic opportunities have been explored, and local community members have begun to participate with national conservation agencies (eg national protected areas) to jointly manage the area's natural resources, including grassland management and conservation of endangered wildlife (Figure 5). The key has been to work at the pace of the community, not external parties (including project fun-

FIGURE 5 Participant at a "community co-management" meeting, in which the local people are among the key stakeholders. (Photo by author)



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ders), and even more importantly to seek and give opportunity for local voices to be heard as often as possible. This is most productive when carried out both within projects *per se* and at the policy level through regional/national planning workshops and academic conferences. Involving Tibetan herders in community development and conservation planning has never been a fast road to travel, but it is the only route by which a more equitable and sustainable future can be reached.

In 2006, the management bureau of the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve endorsed the principle of "community co-management" of natural resources (Box 1) by choosing to collaborate with a Tibetan community situated near the source of the Yangtze River, allowing them to promote socioeconomic development as they see fit, as long as the community simultaneously agrees to monitor and protect a local population of Tibetan wild yak. Most recently, in late 2007, the aforementioned project in Zhiduo County also held further planning meetings with local Tibetan communities, NGOs, the government, and the nature reserve, in order to extend the above co-management approach into a new area—this time focusing on the snow leopard, an important wetland with many breeding black-necked crane, and several other endangered Tibetan wildlife species.

However, while co-management is good theory and is already accepted in principle by some high-level decision-makers in China, there still remain several large institutional barriers to be overcome. These barriers include an ever-present concern over the roles that may be played at the grassroots level (including local communities and civil society in general), the quasi-universal acceptance by government leaders that urbanization *per se* may solve most development and environmental problems, and the general perception that most problems will have a simple technical solution instead of a more complex solution that incorporates important social dimensions. In addition, any proposed solution to conservation or development problems must be viable within the present socio-political context of China. Nonetheless, in our shared experience so far, we have seen that even in the present system good progress in community-based development and conservation has been made—itself a noteworthy achievement—and we therefore strongly recommend that the conceptual approach of community co-management be pursued in practice. At a minimum, this model for combining conservation and development in the heart of the Tibetan plateau could usefully be applied more widely in China's grasslands, and possibly more generally throughout western China.

Community co-management

Community co-management is an approach to development by which all stakeholders, including local communities, jointly assess and then address a situation as co-equal partners.

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