



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Chinese policies increase risk of climate emergency for Tibetan nomads, UN panel says

<https://savetibet.org/chinese-policies-increase-risk-of-climate-emergency-for-tibetan-nomads-un-panel-says>

August 12, 2019

- China's policies in Tibet have increased the vulnerability of Tibetan pastoralists to climate change, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states in its latest report, "Climate Change and the Land," released Aug. 8, 2019. While the Chinese government blames Tibetan nomads for the degradation of Tibet's vast grasslands, the IPCC and experts around the world—including in the People's Republic of China (PRC)—disagree. They reflect a scientific consensus that mass removal of pastoralists from their land is extremely damaging because indigenous stewardship and herd mobility are essential to both the health of rangelands and climate change mitigation.
- Food security is a major theme of the IPCC report on climate change and land. In a world where food security is threatened by climate change, the dangers posed by policies that threaten to eviscerate a sustainable way of life uniquely suited to the harsh landscape of Tibet, the world's highest and largest plateau, are clear. NGO experts recommend that, instead of being removed, Tibetans could be involved in the vital work of pasture regeneration, enabling them to live on and protect the land.
- The report sounds the alarm on the global climate emergency. Without immediate action, the IPCC warns, global warming will erode the capacity of land to support human life and impair food production across the planet. The report quantifies how abuse of the land through deforestation, degradation of pastoral grassland habitat, and draining of carbon-capturing peatlands are driving climate change and further exacerbated by the effects of climate change.

Tibet, a climate change epicenter featured in the IPCC report

The IPCC report is the product of 107 scientists from 52 countries, referencing the results of some 7,000 studies and bringing together research on climate change, food systems, land degradation and biodiversity loss.

The report specifically refers to the dangers of land degradation on the Tibetan plateau, referring to the changes in the composition of the vast rangelands of the earth's "Third Pole," the largest repository of fresh water outside the North and South Poles and source of the earth's eight largest river systems. The report states: "Bare ground cover is projected to increase, averaging 2.4 percent across rangelands, with increases projected for the eastern Great Plains, eastern Australia, parts of southern Africa, and the southern Tibetan Plateau. Herbaceous cover declines are projected in the Tibetan Plateau, the eastern Great Plains, and scattered parts of the Southern Hemisphere. Shrub

cover is projected to decline in eastern Australia, parts of southern Africa, the Middle East, the Tibetan Plateau, and the eastern Great Plains.”¹

Tibet, the world’s highest and largest plateau, is known to be a global climate change epicenter, warming more than twice as fast as the rest of the world, with its glaciers and permafrost melting.² Instead of seeking to protect this fragile high-altitude ecosystem and address the significant challenges it faces, China’s policies are re-shaping the Tibetan landscape with devastating consequences.³ The IPCC report acknowledges that the vulnerability of pastoral systems to climate change is “very high” even without policies faced in the PRC,⁴ and it also notes that impacts on global rangelands and livestock have received comparatively less attention than the impacts on crop production, despite the very serious consequences.⁵

Citing field research by Professor Emily Yeh of the University of Colorado and others, the IPCC states that: “In Tibet, emergency aid has provided shelters and privatised communally owned rangeland, which have increased the vulnerability of pastoralists to climate change.”⁶ This is a reference to emergency relief after extreme weather conditions, but it also links the crisis to China’s policies of settlement, resettlement and fencing of pastoral areas in Tibet,⁷ which have dramatically curtailed nomadic herders’ livelihoods and given the authorities greater administrative control over people’s movements and lifestyles.

Extreme weather conditions

¹ Chapter Five of the IPCC report, section 5.2.2.2 Impacts on livestock production systems, at: https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2019/08/2f.-Chapter-5_FINAL.pdf.

² A Reuters article citing Xinhua news states that temperatures in the northeastern region of Qinghai have been rising three times the global average. See Reuters, ‘Temperatures significantly rise on China’s Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau – state media’, October 27, 2018, <http://news.trust.org/item/20181027095547-rzfx1/>.

³ International Campaign for Tibet report, ‘Blue Gold from the Highest Plateau: Tibet’s Water and Global Climate Change’, December 8, 2015, <https://savetibet.org/new-report-reveals-global-significance-of-tibet/>

⁴ The IPCC report states: “Vulnerability of pastoral systems to climate change is very high (high confidence). Pastoralism is practiced in more than 75% of countries by between 200 and 500 million people, including nomadic communities, transhumant herders, and agro-pastoralists. Impacts in pastoral systems include lower pasture and animal productivity, damaged reproductive function, and biodiversity loss. Pastoral system vulnerability is exacerbated by non-climate factors.”

⁵ The report states: “Projected impacts. The impacts of climate change on global rangelands and livestock have received comparatively less attention than the impacts on crop production. Projected impacts on grazing systems include changes in herbage growth (due to changes in atmospheric CO₂ concentrations and rainfall and temperature regimes) and changes in the composition of pastures and in herbage quality, as well as direct impacts on livestock. Droughts and high temperatures in grasslands can also be a predisposing factor for fire occurrence (IPCC 2012). Net primary productivity, soil organic carbon, and length of growing period. There are large uncertainties related to grasslands and grazing lands (Erb et al. 2016), especially in regard to net primary productivity (NPP). (Chapter Five, 5.2.2.2 Impacts on livestock production systems).

⁶ Unfortunately the IPCC report misrepresents Emily Yeh’s research by linking the privatization of rangeland to emergency aid. In an email communication received by ICT on August 9 (2019), Emily Yeh said: “We do not say that emergency aid has privatized communal rangeland, rather we show how privatized pastures has, in conjunction with other factors such as decreased labor availability, increased vulnerability to livestock loss from snowstorms despite other measures that one would otherwise expect to decrease vulnerability.”

⁷ Sedentarisation of Tibetan nomads in China: Implementation of the Nomadic settlement project in the Tibetan Amdo area; Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces <https://pastoralismjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/2041-7136-1-4>

Extreme weather conditions on the Tibetan plateau, including snowstorms, that have led to large-scale loss of livestock are projected to grow in intensity and frequency with climate change.⁸ River runoff and rainfall is also increasing, leading to major floods. Based on fieldwork by co-authors in Nagchu (Chinese: Naqu), the Tibet Autonomous Region, Yeh has documented how political-economic and institutional changes from the 1950s to the present have altered pastoralists' ability to use various coping strategies, with mobility one of the most important. In a separate paper published in 2014, Yeh wrote: "Recent government projects have focused on emergency aid and providing shelters. However, these are less effective than mobility and less important than the availability of labor power. Mobility and labor power have been reduced by development and environmental policies, as well as by larger political-economic transformations. These transformations have shifted herders' coping strategies from internal to external, increasing their reliance upon the state."⁹

The summer of 2018 was one of the wettest ever in Tibet, with torrential rains in the cities of Lhasa and Shigatse and other areas of central Tibet leading to landslides, flooding and infrastructure damage, making many roads impassable.¹⁰ Earlier this year, there were three months of multiple severe snowstorms in Yulshul (Chinese: Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai. Not only did a large number of yaks and sheep die, but many wild animals, including blue sheep, white-lipped deer, Tibetan gazelles, wild yaks, and several species of birds such as Tibetan snow cock also starved to death. Many nomadic families in Dzatoe County, a pastoral area, lost all of their livestock, most of them yaks. Without grass to eat, the starving animals sought to sustain themselves by eating the fur of dead yaks.¹¹

Tibet environment specialist Gabriel Lafitte points out that the mobility of Tibetan pastoralists was in itself a response to an unpredictable climate. In a report about climate change and Tibetan nomads published by the Minority Rights Group, Lafitte writes: "That mobility, long regarded with suspicion by China as primitive and uncivilized, has been forcibly restricted through successive strategies, first by compulsory collectivization, then by allocating land tenure to individual families while preventing customary seasonal rotations. With compulsory fencing and enforced stocking ratios further undermining the traditional pastoralist system, increasing blame has been heaped by the state on nomadic communities as the shrinking land allocations available to them have become insufficient to sustain their herds. This vicious circle is now approaching its final spiral. From beginning to end, nomadic lifestyles and the Chinese government's policies have been driven by differing approaches to climate change."¹²

⁸ Global warming reaches Tibet; extreme weather on plateau

<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/world/Global-warming-reaches-Tibet-extreme-weather-on-plateau/article20740057.ece>

⁹ 'Tibetan Pastoralists' Vulnerability to Climate Change: A Political Ecology Analysis of Snowstorm Coping Capacity' by Emily T. Yeh & Yonten Nyima & Kelly A. Hopping & Julia A. Klein, *Human Ecology* (2014) 42:61–74 DOI 10.1007/s10745-013-9625-5, published online on November 13, 2013 at:

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Kelly_Hopping/publication/263190282_Tibetan_Pastoralists%27_Vulnerability_to_Climate_Change_A_Political_Ecology_Analysis_of_Snowstorm_Coping_Capacity/links/57bf864108aed246b0f7d7df/Tibetan-Pastoralists-Vulnerability-to-Climate-Change-A-Political-Ecology-Analysis-of-Snowstorm-Coping-Capacity.pdf

¹⁰ Mudslide blocks Sichuan-Tibet highway

<http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201807/11/WS5b45bcb310796df4df5d11.html>

¹¹ International Campaign for Tibet blog, '2019 Severe Snow Disaster in Dzatoe, Tibet', by Rinchen Tashi, posted March 15, 2019, <https://weblog.savetibet.org/author/rinchen-t/>

¹² 'Tibet: Nomads caught between climate change and 'conservation'', Minority Rights Group, 'Minority and Indigenous Trends 2019', <https://minorityrights.org/tibet-nomads/>

Tibet's fast-melting glaciers—and the impacts

The glacial sources of Asia's great rivers, at 6,000 to 8,000 meters above sea level, are melting fast. The rising and overflowing lakes and rivers are now well-documented, particularly in Chinese scientific publications.¹³

In a possible indicator of alarm at the unfolding impacts, the official Qinghai Science and Technology Weekly reported Chinese authorities completed a comprehensive scientific analysis of water depth and quality of ten lakes in the Tibet Autonomous Region at the end of July, including the first official analysis of the sacred lake Yamdrok Tso, located between Lhasa and Gyantse.¹⁴

Lakes on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (as Chinese media refers to it) account for more than 50 per cent of the total area of lakes in PRC.¹⁵ Experts from the Institute of Tibetan Plateau Research of the Chinese Academy of Sciences were cited as saying that the lake area of the plateau "increased from 25,600 square kilometers to 32,300 square kilometers in the past 20 years, an increase of 26%. The main cause of this change is accelerated glacial melt and increased precipitation."¹⁶

The same Chinese scientific report also acknowledges that some individual lakes are shrinking—such as Yamdrok Tso. This week, the Lhokha (Chinese: Shannan) municipality announced regulations on the protection of Yamdrok Tso, coming into force on Sept. 1, 2019. The regulations, which appear to confirm serious environmental damage to the lake, include "maintaining the area of water surface, ensuring water supply, anti-pollution measures and other protection measures."¹⁷

Food security and land tenure: Why settlement of nomads isn't the answer

In 2010, senior UN expert and then-Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier De Schutter linked food security with land tenure and raised concerns about settlement policies and their impacts on people and landscape. In his report, De Schutter stated, "While there is little doubt about the extent of the land degradation problem, the Special Rapporteur would note that herders should not, as a result of the measures adopted under the tuimu huancao [converting pastures to grasslands] policy, be put in a situation where they have no other options than to sell their herd and resettle."¹⁸ The special rapporteur's statement also notes that the PRC has ratified both the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which prohibits depriving any people of its means of subsistence, and the 1992 Convention on Biodiversity, which acknowledges the importance of

¹³ A Bounty of New Lakes on the Tibetan Plateau, Huazhong Ren, from Peking University, and his colleagues have been studying changes in Tibetan Plateau lakes, <https://landsat.gsfc.nasa.gov/a-bounty-of-new-lakes-on-the-tibetan-plateau/>

¹⁴ Qinghai Science and Technology Weekly, 'The second Qinghai-Tibet scientific study had completed the examination of 10 lakes in Tibet' July 31, 2019, http://www.cnepaper.com/qhkjb/html/2019-07/31/content_2_3.htm

¹⁵ Chinese scientists launch survey on depth of major lake in Tibet http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/23/c_138251778.htm.

¹⁶ 'Understanding the lakes of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau', February 23, 2018, <http://news.sciencenet.cn/sbhtmlnews/2018/2/332460.shtm?id=332460>

¹⁷ Tibet3 website in Tibetan, posted August 8, 2019, <https://ti.tibet3.com/news/tibet/xz/2019-08-08/40597.html>

¹⁸ Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Mission to the People's Republic of China from 15 to 23 December 2010 Beijing, 23 December 2010, Preliminary Observations and Conclusions, <http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/de-schutter-china-statement.pdf>, page 4.

indigenous communities as guarantors and protectors of biodiversity (Art. 8 j). It does not appear that the special rapporteur's conclusions were taken up by the Chinese leadership, which has accelerated the displacement of nomads still further.¹⁹

De Schutter encouraged Chinese authorities “to engage in meaningful consultations with herding communities, including in order to assess the results of past and current policies, and examine all available options, including recent strategies of sustainable management of marginal pastures such as the New Rangeland Management (NRM) in order to combine the knowledge of the nomadic herders of their territories with the information that can be drawn from modern science.”²⁰

Recommendations for the protection of Tibet

The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) makes the following recommendations:

- The Chinese government should impose a moratorium on the settlement of Tibetan pastoral nomads displaced by development or conservation, pending an independent assessment, including a legal review, of policies that require or produce displacement and resettlement, the confiscation of property and the imposed slaughter of livestock and denies access to land.
- Extreme drying of wetlands, whether caused by humans or induced by climate change, now threatens biodiversity, agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods across the Tibetan plateau. Chinese authorities must be urged to remediate water meadow habitats as a top priority to prevent methane emissions and biodiversity loss and in turn enhance rural livelihood.
- The Chinese government should allow pastoralists to live in protected areas including newly created National Parks on the Tibetan plateau²¹ and to continue the practice of pastoralism, given that current policy on the settlement of Tibetan nomads has led to increased rangelands degradation. The Chinese government should not engage in ‘green grabbing’ (displacement by conservation).²²
- Consistent with a recent UN Human Rights Council resolution on climate change and human rights and existing international human rights standards,²³ governments and civil society stakeholders should ensure climate change responses uphold human rights by:
 - Recognizing that Tibetan pastoralists carry traditional ecosystems knowledge that is valuable for developing sustainable grassland management policies.
 - Including pastoralists as part of the decision-making and solution developing process.

¹⁹ International Campaign for Tibet report, ‘Mass migration program highlights contested nomads’ resettlement policies in Tibet’, June 21, 2018, <https://savetibet.org/mass-migration-program-highlights-contested-nomads-resettlement-policies-in-tibet>

²⁰ Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Mission to the People’s Republic of China from 15 to 23 December 2010 Beijing, 23 December 2010, Preliminary Observations and Conclusions, <http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/de-schutter-china-statement.pdf>, pages 4-5.

²¹ See Gabriel Lafitte, ‘Inventing the Green Rice Bowl’, blog at www.rukor.org posted on August 3, 2019.

²² See, e.g., Communication by the United Nations Mandates of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; and the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, AL CHN 16/2018, from July 27, 2018, on a reported access bans to the UNESCO protected natural reserve of Hoh Xil.

²³ The UN Human Rights Council in Geneva adopted this resolution on climate change and human rights in July (2015). See report at Climate Change News, July 6, 2015 <http://www.climatechangenews.com/2015/07/06/climate-change-is-a-matter-of-human-rights-agrees-un/>

- Upholding the principle of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) in relation to all decisions over development of Tibet's resources, including all mining and damming projects on the Tibetan plateau.
- Upholding procedural obligations in relation to environmental protection, including duties to assess environmental impacts and make environmental information public; to facilitate public participation in environmental decision-making, including by protecting the rights of expression and association; and to provide access to remedies for harm.

UN special rapporteurs, world governments, parliaments and civil society stakeholders should, through public statements, bilateral channels and international institutions, express concerns over the unsustainable development of Tibet's water resources and the governance of rivers arising from Tibet on the basis of the plateau and beyond being considered a vital water-shed area.²⁴ This requires treating the Tibetan watershed as a supranational unit essential to effective conservation, multilateral coordination and cooperation and effective water demand management and climate change mitigation.

Finally, international organizations, governments, parliaments and civil society stakeholders should urge and support independent, international scientific assessments of the changes in the Tibetan plateau's ecosystems, water resources and land use policies, and data sharing. Independent research is necessary for rigorous examination, analysis and interpretation of conditions on the plateau. This will facilitate an equitable and durable approach to adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change in the region.

ICT quote

Kai Müller, head of ICT's UN advocacy team and executive director of ICT Germany:

"This vital IPCC report makes it clear that China's land use policies in Tibet must be challenged as a matter of utmost urgency. This requires collaboration among international organizations, governments, civil society stakeholders and, importantly, Tibetan pastoralists in research and responses to changes in the Tibetan plateau's ecosystem, water resources and policies. Such an approach can be developed to ensure durable approaches to adapting to, and mitigating, climate change. Already, some Chinese environmental NGOs and Tibetans working together have shown in practice that keeping pastoralists on the rangelands, skillfully working on eco-husbandry and protecting and managing the land, is the way of the future, not only of the past.

"Tibet's water and its land are seen as strategic assets 'owned' by the Chinese Communist Party state, and so Beijing's policies in Tibet remain exempt from genuine debate and enquiry. But it can no longer be acceptable for Tibet to be sealed off from the world—and for the voices of Tibetans in local communities on the frontline of the climate emergency to be silenced. Given its critical importance, the impact of climate change on the Tibetan plateau is not only a regional but a global issue, of unique significance for the future of life on earth."

²⁴ It has been characterized as the "Greater Asian Water-Shed" – see Earth Economics, <http://eartheconomics.org/Page76.aspx>. A watershed is "that area of land, a bounded hydrologic system, within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demanded that they become part of a community." (John Wesley Powell, scientist geographer, cited by the United States Environment Protection Agency: <http://water.epa.gov/type/watersheds/whatis.cfm>).