INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Despite damning UN climate report, China refuses to make changes in Tibet

https://savetibet.org/despite-damning-un-climate-report-china-refuses-to-make-changes-in-tibet/

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- China's leader Xi Jinping seeks to present the People's Republic of China (PRC) as an "ecological civilization" with Tibet as a key element. But China's policies on the Tibetan Plateau, which have so far received little attention globally, exacerbate the detrimental impacts detailed in the latest report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). For example, despite a looming water crisis, China is proceeding with a massive expansion of hydro dams and power grids on the rivers of Tibet.
- The IPCC report, which offers the most authoritative statement on the critical issues facing the planet, was released on Sept. 25, 2019 as world leaders met at the UN Climate Action Summit in New York. During the summit, China, the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter, failed to make any concrete commitments to reduce its emissions, the main step required of all governments in keeping with the 2018 IPCC report on what is needed to prevent runaway climate change from occurring once temperatures rise beyond 1.5 degrees C.
- China's restrictions on access to Tibet mean that international scientists are rarely able to make independent, on-the-ground investigations of impacts or obtain comprehensive hydrological data and details of the complex interplay between climate and glacial loss, among other critical issues. Far less research is possible on the changing climate of Tibet, the world's Third Pole, than on the other two poles.

China refuses to commit on climate pledges

At the UN Climate Action Summit earlier this month, UN Secretary-General António Guterres invited leaders to make new commitments to cut their emissions, stop building coal plants and end fossil fuel subsidies. But none of the large polluters, particularly China, met the UN secretary-general's call to raise their climate pledges. "China's statement was potentially the most consequential. It remains up to developed countries to lead, the country said," reported Karl Mathiesen of Climate Home News. "It's also a poke in the eye for the UN, which had flagged its confidence that China would front up with new ambition."[1]

Since the global climate change conference in Paris in 2015, China has made no specific commitments to reduce emissions, other than a proposal to start to do so in 2030. But, according to the IPCC, this is when emission reductions need to be completed, not beginning, if the planet is to avoid even further uncontrollable temperature increases.

[1] Climate Home News, September 23, 2019, https://www.climatechangenews.com/2019/09/23/un-climate-action-summit-live/.

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China is the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter, and its actions both domestically and abroad have an enormous impact on global greenhouse gas emissions. Increased fossil-fuel consumption drove an estimated 2.3 percent increase in Chinese CO2 emissions in 2018. The IPCC Special Report *Global Warming of 1.5°C* found that coal needs to exit the power sector by 2050 globally if warming is to be limited to this level, and efforts by China to reduce coal in the next few years will be critical to this. But China started construction on 28 gigawatts of new coal-fired power capacity in 2018 after a previous construction ban was lifted.[2]

Of China's 50 biggest cities, Xining in Qinghai province now ranks as one of the highest emitters of carbon dioxide, due almost entirely to the heavy industries surrounding Xining that process Tibetan minerals, oil and gas with little effective regulation.[3]

Exclusion of Tibetan pastoralists heightens climate change vulnerability

As a result, Tibetan pastoralists, who have skillfully managed the precarious, rugged high altitude environment for centuries, now face the devastating implications of climate change compounded by the negative impact of Chinese policies.

While the Chinese government blames Tibetan nomads for the degradation of Tibet's vast grasslands, the IPCC and experts around the world—including in China—disagree, reflecting 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 the mitigation of climate change. The IPCC's report on "Climate Change and the Land," released Aug. 8, 2019, notes that China's policies in Tibet have increased the vulnerability of Tibetan nomadic herders to climate change.[4]

Highlighting the importance of local and indigenous knowledge, the IPCC report released in September gives the example of the people of Ladakh—a region in India that borders Tibet—creating ice stupas to be available as ice melt in spring when young crops need watering well before the summer monsoon arrives.[5]

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[2] Climate Action Tracker, updated September 19, 2019, https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/china/ The same source stated: "China is simultaneously, and almost paradoxically, the world's largest consumer of coal and the largest solar technology manufacturer, and the choice it makes between the technology of the past versus the future will have a lasting effect on the world's ability to limit warming to 1.5oC."

[3] Haikun Wang, Xi Lu, Y Deng, Yaoguang Sun, Chris P.Nielsen, Ge Zhu, Yifan Liu, Maoliang Bu, Jun Bi and Michael B McElroy, 'China's CO2 peak before 2030 implied from characteristics and growth of cities', Nature Sustainability, July 29, 2019, 748-754 https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0339-6

[4] International Campaign for Tibet report, 'Chinese policies increase risk of climate emergency for Tibetan nomads, UN panel says', August 12, 2019, https://savetibet.org/chinese-policies-increase-risk-of-climate-emergency-for-tibetan-nomads-un-panel-says/.

[5] The IPCC report states: "To cope with seasonal water scarcity at critical times for irrigation, villagers in the region have developed four types of artificial ice reservoirs: basins, cascades, diversions and a form known locally as ice stupas. All these types of ice reservoirs capture water in the autumn and winter, allowing it to freeze, and hold it until spring, when it melts and flows down to fields (Clouse et al., 2017; Nusser et al., 2018). In this way, they retain a previously unused portion of the annual flow and facilitate its use to supplement the decreased flow in the following spring (Vince, 2009; Shaheen, 2016). Frozen basins are formed from water which is conveyed across a slope through channels and check dams to shaded surface depressions near the villages. Cascades and diversions direct water to pass over stone walls, slowing its movement and allowing it to freeze. Ice stupas direct water through pipes into fountains, where it freezes into conical shapes (Box 2.3 Figure 1). These techniques use local materials and draw on Local Knowledge (Nüsser and Baghel, 2016)." 2-34, 'Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate',

In Tibet, in contrast, China's policies exclude rather than involve the knowledge of pastoralists in helping to rehabilitate degrading areas, contrary to worldwide experience in community-based landscape restoration.

Dangerous implications of glacial runoff

One of the most alarming aspects of the new IPCC report is the issue of runoff from melting glaciers on the Tibetan Plateau. The report states: "At first, glacier runoff increases because the glacier melts faster and more water flows downhill from the glacier. However, there will be a turning point after several years or decades, often called 'peak water,' after which glacier runoff and hence its contribution to river flow downstream will decline. Peak water runoff from glaciers can exceed the amount of initial yearly runoff by 50 percent or more." The IPCC notes that: "This excess water can be used in different ways, such as for hydropower or irrigation."[6]

The IPCC estimates that with regard to the high plateau, "peak water" will come as soon as the middle of this century, in 30 years' time.[7]

Gabriel Lafitte, an expert on Tibet's environment, explains that China receives dividends from Tibet's water runoff.[8]

He writes, "That dividend shows up not in the corporate bottom line but politically, in China's program to depopulate the Tibetan highlands, to clear out the pasture users between the glaciers and the lowlands. Guaranteeing water supply is officially the main driver of the policy of closing pastures to grow more grass and protect water supply, a policy over the past two decades that has made redundant hundreds of thousands of skilled pastoralists in the river catchments below the glaciers but above the Chinese industrial consumers."[9]

The Tibetan Plateau is regarded by scientists as the most important glacial region outside of the Arctic and Antarctic and is also the source of the earth's eight largest river systems. Despite the dangers to this fragile, high-altitude ecosystem and a looming water crisis highlighted by the IPCC, China earlier this year announced a massive expansion of hydro dams and power grids on the rivers of Tibet, especially on the Drichu (Chinese: Yangtze) and its tributaries, to impound, divert and extract more water.

Further dams along the Yarlung Tsangpo (called Brahmaputra in India), the Machu (Eng: Yellow River, Ch: Huanghe) and the Gyalmo Ngulchu (Eng: Salween, Ch: Nujiang) rivers[10] are either under construction or in planning, along with a rail and road expressway. Images of the locations monitored

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https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/home/ The IPCC approved and accepted Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate at its 51st Session held on 20 – 23 September 2019.

[6] IPCC report as cited above, 2-28.

[7] IPCC report as cited above, 2-26, "Local and regional-scale projections in High Mountain Asia [...] suggest that peak water will generally be reached before or around the middle of the century."

[8] Gabriel Lafitte blog, www.rukor.org.

[9] Ibid

[10] International Campaign for Tibet report, 'Damming Tibet's Rivers', https://savetibet.org/damming-tibets-rivers-new-threats-to-tibetan-area-under-unesco-protection/.

by the International Campaign for Tibet reveal the extent of road and infrastructure construction required to transport heavy equipment into the sites, demonstrating that the damage done by dams is not limited to the rivers, but also affects the entire landscape. Until now, these areas were among the least disturbed habitats on earth.[11]

[11] Also see International Campaign for Tibet report, 'Blue Gold from the highest plateau: Tibet's water and global climate change', May, 2015, https://savetibet.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ICT-Water-Report-2015.pdf

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