



# INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Written testimony by the International Campaign for Tibet for the Congressional-  
Executive Commission on China Hearing

China's Environmental Challenges and U.S. Responses

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## **China's Plunder of the Tibetan Plateau: Tool of Oppression**

The integrity of the Tibetan Plateau's environment is vital to global sustainability, political stability and the perpetuation of a distinct people, culture and centuries-old religion. For over six decades, the authoritarian People's Republic of China has deployed environmental destruction as a key tool in its campaign to systematically dismantle Tibetan culture in pursuit of expansionism, assimilation and hegemony. The result has wreaked havoc on ecosystems and human lives and will continue to do so without a coordinated response.

Situated about 4,000 meters above sea level, the Tibetan Plateau is a geographical region spanning 2.5 million square kilometers. In terms of total area, it constitutes one quarter of the present-day People's Republic of China.<sup>1</sup> The Tibetan Plateau deserves particular environmental attention. Its fragile and unique ecosystem has historically enjoyed protection by natural geographic barriers, as well as the conservationist precepts embedded in the Tibetan tradition embraced by its estimated six million inhabitants. The Tibetan Plateau is the world's third-largest repository of fresh water, after the South and North Poles. Many of Asia's major rivers originate in Tibet, and up to 2 billion people<sup>2</sup> across the Asian continent depend on their healthy flow.<sup>3</sup>

The Himalayan region and Tibetan Plateau are also rich in biodiversity, sitting at the intersection of three biodiversity hotspots—defined as the Earth's most biologically rich, but threatened terrestrial regions.<sup>4</sup> For centuries, Tibet's extensive, native grasslands have

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<sup>1</sup> Josephine Ma, 11 March 2009, 'The double-edged sword of 'Greater Tibet'', <https://www.scmp.com/article/672872/double-edged-sword-greater-tibet>.

<sup>2</sup> The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment: Mountains, Climate Change, Sustainability and People <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-3-319-92288-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Kumar, A. (2017). Impact of Tibetan Ecological Disequilibrium on Lower Riparian Regions of Asia. *The Tibet Journal*, 42(2), 7–16. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90024489>

<sup>4</sup> Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, 2019, 'What is a biodiversity hotspot?', <https://www.cepf.net/our-work/biodiversity-hotspots/hotspots-defined>.

sustained Tibetans' nomadic way of life, one based on stewardship and respect for the natural world.

### **Policy of Plunder**

Following its military takeover of Tibet beginning in 1949, the PRC's decades-long strategies of exploiting the Tibetan environment and oppressing its people have gone hand in glove, one reinforcing the other. This is particularly offensive because it denigrates deeply held Tibetan beliefs in the protection of all living things, as well as nature, which led to the evolution of successful environmental protection practices.

The environmental problems in Tibet today have become quite complex and cannot be viewed in isolation. A striking illustration is the PRC's declaration that it plans to construct dozens of dams on Tibet's rivers<sup>5</sup> in the decade ahead. Six of Asia's major rivers originate in Tibet, and up to 2 billion people across the Asian continent depend on their healthy flow. Such extensive damming will place the water supply of countries throughout the region at risk and under the Chinese government's control. Thus, denying Tibetans' self-determination over their own resources will create a cascade effect that also denies downstream countries the right to their self-determination, providing the PRC another tool to expand its global power.<sup>6</sup> Further, controversy continues to mount regarding the environmental and climate impacts of such massive dam building, including assumed emissions reductions.<sup>7</sup> Such evidence raises the need for a reevaluation of these colossal dams, calling into question the PRC regime's greenwashing of its hydroelectric expansion as "necessary" to combat climate change.

Just one example demonstrates the potential severity of this environmental situation and its regional implications. In 2019, a severe drought caused water levels in the Mekong River to drop to their lowest point in more than 100 years. This affected millions of people in Southeast Asian countries living and working along the river. The Chinese government claims that low precipitation caused the drought and its impacts. However, experts underscored that China had used its network of dams to hold back water from the river, exacerbating the problem and leaving many without access to fresh water, according to a study by the Stimson Center.<sup>8</sup>

The Chinese government's forcible relocation of Tibetan nomads from their ancestral grazing lands is another illustration of the regime's strategy to exert control over the Tibetan people through the repurposing and destruction of ancestral resources. Based on available data, at

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<sup>5</sup> ICT: "Damming Tibet's Rivers," <https://savetibet.org/damming-tibets-rivers-new-threats-to-tibetan-area-under-unesco-protection/>

<sup>6</sup> Jamestown Foundation, "Beijing Boosts its Position as a "Himalayan Hegemon" Through Hydropower," <https://jamestown.org/program/beijing-boosts-its-position-as-a-himalayan-hegemon-through-hydropower/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.internationalrivers.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/86/2020/05/intlivers\\_wrongclimate\\_4.pdf](https://www.internationalrivers.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/86/2020/05/intlivers_wrongclimate_4.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Brian and Weatherby, Courtney. "New Evidence: How Chvidence-how-china-turned-off-the-mekong-tap/"

least 1.8 million Tibetan nomads have been resettled in sedentary houses under PRC policies<sup>9</sup> in a two-pronged plan to erode Tibetan identity while cashing in on pit mining, logging, damming and other forms of environmental degradation.

A third devastating example is the PRC's indiscriminate past clear-cutting in the biologically rich Tibetan forests. This deforestation represents double indemnity. Forests are carbon sinks. Therefore, their removal has contributed to climate change, undermining global climate goals. Further, given that forests function to preserve watersheds and waterways, clear cutting has worsened and will worsen the region's water challenges.

Yet another stark example of China's integrated environmental and human rights violations is rampant, often unregulated, mining. Mines in Tibet create significant pollution and create costs that disproportionately impact Tibetans and the local environment. For example, residents are forcefully relocated to allow for new mines. Mines also threaten the health of humans, their livestock and the environment. The open-pit Muli coal mine in Tsonub (Chinese: Haixi) Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai province (northeastern Tibet) spread a layer of black coal dust across the landscape, causing grassland degradation and the loss of permafrost (the layer of frozen soil that stores water for the benefit of surface ecologies).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Jiajika lithium mine in Lhagang (Chinese: Tagong) township, Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan province, in the Tibetan area of Kham, twice (in October 2013 and May 2016) leaked toxic chemicals into the local water supply, killing fish and local livestock.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Cultural rights and climate change," International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) submission to the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, May 28, 2020 (Data corroborated from Chinesestate media reports, e.g. China Daily, 6 July 2012: 'Over 1 million Tibetan nomads choose settlement', accessed on May 27, 2020, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-07/06/content\\_15555645.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-07/06/content_15555645.htm) or Xinhua, 1 December 2012: 'Massive nomad settlement to protect "mother river"', accessed on May 27, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/90882/8041990.html>.)

<sup>10</sup> The Guardian, 7 August 2014: 'Illegal coalmine encroaching on nature reserve in north-west China', <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/aug/07/illegal-coal-mine-nature-reserve-china> .

<sup>11</sup> Tibet Watch, January 2015, 'Environmental Protests on the Tibetan Plateau', [https://tibet.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/environmental\\_protests\\_on\\_the\\_tibetan\\_plateau.pdf](https://tibet.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/environmental_protests_on_the_tibetan_plateau.pdf); 'Tibetans Protest Against Pollution from Mining', Free Tibet, 9 May 2016 [www.freetibet.org/news-media/na/tibetans-protest-against-pollution-mining](http://www.freetibet.org/news-media/na/tibetans-protest-against-pollution-mining).

### **Punishing the Truth**

The PRC's policies have resulted in calamitous environmental disasters and when Tibetans protest against environmental damage to their homeland they are met with brutal responses from the Chinese Communist Party. Major recent incidents include:

- In 2009, toxic chemicals from a mine near the town of Lhagang leaked into the river, resulting in massive fish deaths.<sup>12</sup>
- 2010 saw over a thousand people in Drugchu die when landslides ripped through the deforested hills surrounding the town.<sup>13</sup>
- Also in 2010 Tibetans demonstrating against a mining operation in Palyul were gunned down by Chinese police.<sup>14</sup>
- Another mudslide at a Gyama mine in 2013 claimed 80 people.<sup>15</sup>
- That same year, hundreds of Tibetans were beaten and tear-gassed while protesting a Chinese mine in Dzatoe.<sup>16</sup>
- 2016 brought more protests as Tibetans and police faced off in Amchok in response to mining at Gong-ngon Lhari, a sacred mountain.<sup>17</sup>
- In 2018, a landslide in Jomda County and Palyul County blocked the main stream of Drichu River, forming a barrier lake that submerged multiple Tibetan villages.<sup>18</sup>
- In 2020, there were reports of contaminated water surface from the area around an illegal Chinese coal mine in northern Tibet.<sup>19</sup>

### **Karma Samdrup: Environmentalist Imprisoned**

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<sup>12</sup> Washington Post, "Tibetans in anguish as Chinese mines pollute their sacred grasslands," [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/tibetans-in-anguish-as-chinese-mines-pollute-their-sacred-grasslands/2016/12/25/bb6aad06-63bc-11e6-b4d8-33e931b5a26d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/tibetans-in-anguish-as-chinese-mines-pollute-their-sacred-grasslands/2016/12/25/bb6aad06-63bc-11e6-b4d8-33e931b5a26d_story.html)

<sup>13</sup> France24, "Heavy rain in wake of mudslides hampers rescue efforts," <https://www.france24.com/en/20100812-heavy-rain-hampers-search-rescue-efforts-china-zhouqu-gansu-mudslides>

<sup>14</sup> Four Tibetan Mine Protesters Detained in Palyul, <https://tibetnature.net/en/tibetan-mine-protesters-detained-in-palyul/>

<sup>15</sup> ICT, "Disaster in Gyama draws attention to impact of mining in Tibet," <https://savetibet.org/disaster-in-gyama-draws-attention-to-impact-of-mining-in-tibet/>

<sup>16</sup> RFA, "Tibetan Mine Protesters Vow to Appeal to Beijing," <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/mine-08222013172832.html>

<sup>17</sup> ICT, "Tibetans in Amchok protest mining project at holy Gong-ngon Lari mountain," <https://savetibet.org/tibetans-in-amchok-protest-mining-project-at-holy-gong-ngon-lari-mountain/>

<sup>18</sup> Central Tibetan Administration, "Unchecked Construction could have triggered recent Jomda landslide-flooding in Tibet," <https://tibet.net/unchecked-construction-could-have-triggered-recent-jomda-landslide-flooding-in-tibet-zamlha-tempa-gyaltzen-tibet-policy-institute/>

<sup>19</sup> RFA, "Pollution from Illegal Coal Mining in Qinghai Creates Hardship for Tibetan Nomads," <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/coal-08112020161828.html>

The case of leading Tibetan environmentalist and philanthropist Karma Samdrup, his two brothers, two cousins, other relatives and community members provides a concrete example of the extremity with which the Chinese Communist Party metes out punishment on individuals promoting environmental reform.

In 2009, Karma Samdrup, a well-known collector of Tibetan art and founder of the Three Rivers Environmental Protection Group, was detained following unsuccessful efforts to secure the release of his two brothers, Chime Namgyal and Rinchen Samdrup, who had been imprisoned after their efforts to conserve wildlife in their home area of Chamdo (Chinese: Changdu) Prefecture in the Tibet Autonomous Region. More specifically, Rinchen Samdrup and his younger brother Chime Namgyal were detained from their home after they accused local officials in their home area of poaching endangered species. In the end, Chime was tortured while serving a 21-month “reeducation through labor” sentence based on the spurious allegation that Namgyal had set up an “illegal” environmental organization that “illegally collected three digital disks of information and video footage about the environment, the natural resources and the religion of Changdu prefecture ... provided pictures and material for the illegal publication ‘Forbidden Mountain, Prohibited Hunting’, illegally possessed reactionary propaganda materials from the Dalai clique abroad...and therefore severely interfere[ed] with state power...” (ICT translation from the Chinese RTL document).

In the case of Karma Samdrup, his wife and lawyer reported to the Associated Press (AP, June 22, 2010), that Samdrup told the (kangaroo) court that during months of interrogation, officers beat him, deprived him of sleep for days on end and drugged him with a substance that made his eyes and ears bleed. The PRC’s mistreatment did not end there or even with just the three brothers. Their cousin, Sonam Choephel, also was sentenced to one and a half years of re-education through labor (RTL) in Beijing. Twenty villagers from Gonjo (Chinese: Gongjue) in Chamdo, the brothers’ home area, were detained and tortured for 40 days after they went to Beijing to petition against the brothers’ detention. Karma Samdrup’s mother, who was then in her seventies, was beaten unconscious by police led by a party official.

Karma was sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment in 2010, and his current health condition is reported to be very poor.

### **Environmental Justice**

The plunder of Tibet violates the increasingly scientifically, pragmatically and ethically validated linkages between environmental progress and basic human rights. The need for environmental justice—policies that ensure self-determination, environmental protection and cultural preservation as well as equity—have become front and center in the pursuit of global sustainability. Examples abound, but little could illustrate this recognition better than the fact

that the theme for the upcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow, Scotland is to “*adapt to protect communities and natural habitats.*”<sup>20</sup>

Other UN statements expand on this goal. In a recent press statement, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment David Boyd summarized:

“Leaving human rights on the periphery is simply not an option, because rights-based conservation is the most effective, efficient, and equitable path forward to safeguarding the planet... indigenous people and local communities] “must be acknowledged as key partners in protecting and restoring nature ... their human, land and tenure rights, knowledge, and conservation contributions must be recognized, respected, and supported.”<sup>21</sup>

While being more thoroughly emphasized in current global environmental dialogue, the role of environmental destruction in cultural oppression certainly is not novel. In 2004, scholar Jared Diamond referred to the concept of “ecocide,” describing it as “willful destruction of the natural environment and ecosystems through, a) pollution and other forms of environmental degradation and b) military efforts to undermine a population’s sustainability and means of subsistence.”<sup>22</sup> The Chinese government’s past, present and planned policies in Tibet directly contradict the ancient and modern understanding of the inseparability of the human and natural world’s shared fate. Achieving global sustainability—including avoiding the worst impacts of climate disruption—means no longer silo-ing environmental and human rights into conveniently separate political baskets. The Chinese government’s human rights atrocities reinforce its harmful environmental policies and vice-versa. State leaders must not allow these dual abuses to remain sanctioned by inattention during international environmental negotiations.

### Recommendations

- **Tibet and COP 26:** The Biden administration and Congress must ensure that the environmental crisis in Tibet, including water security and rapid climate change, is addressed at the 2021 COP 26 meeting as a crucial part of any finalized negotiation. The Biden administration should consider holding a side event on the issue of the Tibetan environment.

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<sup>20</sup> “Urgently adapt to protect communities and natural habitats.” <https://ukcop26.org/cop26-goals/adaptation/>

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR Newsroom, “Human rights must be at heart of UN plan to save planet – expert,” <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=27393&LangID=E>

<sup>22</sup> Jones, Genocide, p.27 citing Jared Diamonds, “Collapse: How societies Choose to Fail or Succeed (Viking, 2004)

- **Implement Current Law:** The bipartisan Tibetan Policy and Support Act (TPSA), which was passed by Congress and signed into law in 2020, addresses several of these crucial sustainability and security issues. The legislation states that the secretary of state will have to pursue collaboration with China and international institutions to monitor Tibet's environment and support the Tibetan people's efforts to preserve it.
- **Scientific Access:** The international community should promote the opening up of the Tibetan plateau for scientific research and international collaboration and facilitate the creation of a regional environmental council that discusses and mitigates environmental issues facing the Hindu-Kush Himalayan Mountains and the Tibetan Plateau. More thorough, regular and transparent cross-boundary studies will improve our understanding of the state of the ecosystem.
- **Environmental Justice:** The Biden administration and Congress should include environmental justice as a basic human right in multinational and bilateral treaties.