



## INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

### **Ending Asia's Water Crises Starts at the Top of the World**

<http://www.savetibet.org/ending-asias-water-crises-starts-at-the-top-of-the-world>

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Water is life. Yet, by 2025 50% of the world's population stands to face water scarcity. As a recognized hot spot for this frightening prediction, the fate of South and Southeast Asia depends on better, smarter, and more humane management of the region's eight major rivers which originate from Tibet's glacial peaks.

In this context, International Campaign for Tibet convened the panel "The Tibetan Plateau: Key to Unlocking Regional Peace and Prosperity" at the prominent 2024 World Water Week conference in Stockholm, Sweden. The conference theme was "Bridging Borders: Water for a Peaceful and Sustainable Future."

"We wanted to underscore the scope of Tibet's importance, and the threats to its life-giving rivers," said Franz Matzner, ICT director of government affairs, who moderated. "However, we also hoped to drive home that many communities have experienced the harms of unfettered resource plunder before, yet the past does not have to be prologue."

For this reason, the panel brought together speakers to share their personal and institutional perspectives, including ICT senior researcher Palmo Tenzin, Dr. Marina Mautner of the Stockholm Environment Institute, and Pat Joe from the Dak'laweide Clan (Killer Whale and Wolf Crest) First Nation.

#### **Colonialism: Scars**

Tibet supplies water to 1.8 billion people downstream which is vital for their subsistence, economic growth, and ways of life. Over the course of the panel, Tenzin connected the dots between the healthy flow of these essential rivers and the oft ignored "political elephant in the room", namely, the Chinese Communist Party's occupation of Tibet, and the destruction the CCP's hydropower dam building leaves in its wake.

"In this region, dams are susceptible to earthquakes, landslides, and flashfloods...[they] increase methane pollution," which is a potent greenhouse gas, explained Tenzin. She added that the projects are also linked to human rights violations, including expulsion of Tibetans from their homes and destruction of religious sites.

Echoing the impacts of damming and other colonialist tactics, Pat Joe narrated the story of the damage her ancestors suffered, and continue to suffer, particularly degradation of the First Nation's traditional lands, as well as the trampling of her people's spiritual value of connectedness between humans, animals, and landscapes.

"Our indigenous people relied on the river for...identity..." Joe also emphasized the Tragish people's belief that everything is alive, "the river is alive...it is the mountains that give life. They're not a pile of rock." She went on to describe one example of the way colonialism ate away at her people's core way of life. A large dam was built upriver blocking the massive salmon runs that had come for centuries.

She reported that the fish have now dwindled to a paltry few. [Summarizing the tragedy, Joe described speaking with one of the Nation's young people.](#)

The sad reality is that under the Chinese government's occupation, the Tibetan people and their traditional lands face a similar fate. Though one that is not inevitable.

## Collaboration Is the Key

The panel experts turned to that very question. How can the tragedies of the past inform the present and modern tools prevent their repetition. Dr. Mautner illustrated how SEI's variety of interactive modeling tools, like WEAP and LEAP, use evidence-based tools and complex analysis to guide decision making. [However, Mautner underscored the importance of interaction with local communities.](#)

Elaborating on this point, Joe emphasized the difference between perfunctory and functional inclusion. The first dam built in her area triggered havoc. After their successful struggle to obtain land claims, the situation became very different. In short, legal rights changed the game. Mautner also underscored the necessity of rigorous dialogue with local communities and leaders on their terms. Illustrating the point, she outlined how it is possible to include spiritual values into models—despite the assumption that it's impossible. Tenzin added that collaboration was needed between academic researchers and local communities to ensure that research was not extractive, and all researchers, including remote sensing researchers working on Tibet, need to acknowledge and engage with the political realities on the ground before making conclusions about land-use policies and recommendations.

## Paths Forward

Reflecting on the panel topics of inclusion, solutions, and recognition of potential harms from “development” projects, as well as the need to make balanced decisions within complex scenarios, the discussion ended with an astute audience question to the panelists.

“We need to transition to clean energy. We all know that. And it has to happen now...and with that reasoning it is happening at the expense of the most vulnerable...”

In response, Mautner emphasized avoiding either-or, purely expedient answers. Tenzin emphasized the severe power imbalance for Tibetan's as a subjugated people, and Joe answered with her poignant closing words.

“My First Nation just bought windmills...so we are planning ahead. It is hard for a community that has been traumatized...It's a hard decision to come into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But we want to use those beliefs and values that have sustained us for thousands of years.”



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