



WHERE TO FROM COPENHAGEN?

Number 10 in a series of 10 briefings on climate and Tibet

For Tibetans, and for China, the road from Copenhagen diverges.

Tibetans hope Copenhagen is the beginning of global awareness that Tibet is unique, plays a key role in global climate, especially in generating the Asian monsoon, and in feeding almost all of Asia's great rivers. The Tibetan Plateau is 1.7% of the planet's land surface, a huge island kilometres above all surrounding lands and seas, exerting a profound influence, even on the north Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, according to the latest science.

Despite serious and widespread degradation of Tibetan grasslands in recent years, due as much to policy mistakes as well as climate change, Tibetans are hopeful the eroding pasture land can be rehabilitated.

To restore the fast degrading rangelands will require investment, to guarantee the ongoing provision of environmental services to all peoples downriver and downwind from Tibet. The much needed investment in pasture improvement and nomadic livelihoods has not come from China, which instead invests only in cities, mines and transport corridors in Tibet.

The developed countries at Copenhagen express willingness to assist developing countries to conserve their carbon sinks, guaranteeing their long term future. The willingness of rich countries to pay for environmental services could, if done skilfully, enhance the livelihoods, mobility and sustainability of Tibetan pastoral nomadism, while repairing the grasslands and caring for the water catchments. The prospect is for a true win/win.

But there is a great danger here, because China takes a divergent path from Copenhagen. The very worst that could happen is that, through misunderstanding, international investors actually reward China for coercively excluding nomads from the pastoral plateaus of Tibet. Right now, China is tearing up the long term land rights certificates it issued to Tibetan nomads only two decades ago. The cancellation of long term secure land tenure is part of a new Chinese policy, which has as its sole aim the conservation of the upper watersheds of its great rivers. Instead of achieving this in active partnership with the nomads who have cared for the upper rivers for centuries, the nomads are compulsorily removed, to lead useless lives in cinder block barracks on the edge of their ancestral lands, with no employment prospects, no training in new skills, subsisting on survival rations from the state.

That's tragedy enough, removing productive communities, negating their intimate knowledge of the land, turning nomads into surplus humans, internally displaced in their own country. To make it worse, they are officially labelled "ecological migrants."

That Orwellian inversion of truth hides the reality that the nomads are not voluntary migrants willingly leaving the only life they know, for the greater good. They are coerced and compelled to leave, as several reports have shown. Nor is their removal, and the removal also of all their herds, necessary to attain the ecological goal of conserving the upper reaches of China's great rivers, the Yellow and Yangtze.

Since the nomads are not permitted to speak, there is a danger China could seek payment for having expelled its nomads, and receive rewards for its decades of policy mistakes, beginning with drastic increases in herd size, decades ago, at state insistence.

The current policy of "closing pastureland to restore grassland" (tuimu huancao) is the latest in 50 years of mismanagement of alpine grassland habitats China has little knowledge of historically. Since the 1960s China insisted on increasing herd size far beyond the carrying capacity of the land, while at the same time slaughtering wild animals (gazelles, antelopes, blue sheep, snow leopards) in huge numbers. Since the 1980s China's policy has been to "civilise" the nomads by requiring them to settle into a sedentary life, fenced in, with little room to move, on land too small to maintain herds that need mobility to avoid overgrazing. Little was invested to halt rangeland degradation, but much was spent on poisoning burrowing rodents which are keystone species essential to the entire ecosystem, whose occasional population explosions are actually symptoms of rangeland degradation, not its cause. Another policy mistake.

Further mistakes were made when nomadic pasturelands were dammed and irrigated, excluding nomads in favour of immigrant peasant settlers on tiny plots. On the largely arid Tibetan plateau, the official capture of key water sources undermined nomadic mobility.

While Chinese farmers were granted secure long term land rights in the 1980s it was only in the 1990s that most Tibetan nomads had land returned to them, but those contracts were torn up in this century. Far from working as partners with the nomads, China has consistently viewed nomads as ignorant, primitive and of low human quality, to be governed by decree, from afar. The nomads experience the state as a greedy source of rent-seeking taxes, onerous compulsory labour demands, incomprehensible slogans and policies, penalties and punishments.

Out of this mutual mistrust the new policy of “closing pastures to restore grassland” has come. It is based on observing the rapid acceleration of desertification and degradation across the rangelands of the Tibetan Plateau. Instead of acknowledging past policy failure, the nomads are blamed, as if they are so ignorant and selfish as to trash their own lands.

The new policy is also based on oversimplified science, expressed in the official slogan that “there is a contradiction between grass and animals.” The reasoning is simple: if nomads and their grazing herds are removed, grasses will grow longer, thus conserving and repairing degraded grassland, thus protecting the great rivers of China.

In reality, steady sustainable grazing, as practiced by nomads for thousands of years, does not cause degradation. The accelerating degradation of recent decades, after China took control, has no historic precedent. The tough grasses of Tibet keep most of their living matter (and stored carbon) underground, safe from the teeth of yaks and sheep, beyond the biting cold and wind. The root-to-shoot ratio can be as high as 50 times as much below ground compared to what can be seen above. That is one example of the uniqueness of the Tibetan grasslands, well understood by nomads but invisible to outsiders until very recently.

The official herding of Tibetan nomads off their land is tragic, a mistake as big as the removal of American Indians and Australian Aborigines to reserves over a century ago. Americans and Australians now see their mistakes, even if correcting them is very hard. China makes a similar mistake, but with a 21st century utterly misleading label: “ecological migrants.”

If the industrialised countries at Copenhagen, the historic greenhouse gas emitters, are willing to pay developing countries to conserve forests and watersheds, such payment should go direct to those who actually provide the environmental services, not the central state. In Tibet, this means paying local Tibetan communities to repair their grasslands, care for rivers, maintain water purity, and maintain the nomadic mobility that ensures a light touch on each grassland, moving on before rangeland pastures are damaged.

Tibetans are keen to attract investment finance which will enable them to plant grass seeds on bare black degraded earth, and to continue living mobile pastoral lives that are both productive and sustainable. Rather than rewarding China's central authorities for expelling “ecological migrants”, payments can benefit the people who can do the actual work of carbon sequestration on the rangelands, if the finance is channeled through the many international NGOs working on the ground in Tibet.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

A hyperlinked list of NGOs operating in Tibet can be found at: <http://www.cwru.edu/affil/tibet/NGOProjects.htm>

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