

Grassland Wisdom

The forced relocation and settlement of nomads is one of the most severe and arguably most misguided aspects of Beijing's grand plans for Tibet. In only a few years Chinese authorities have reportedly moved over two million Tibetans from their home on the grasslands to newly constructed settlements, profoundly altering Tibet's social and environmental fabric.

The policy is as self-defeating as it is unjust. Stripped of the livelihoods that have sustained them for thousands of years, a once proud and resilient people now face an uncertain future. And while claimed to be carried out on grounds of environmental protection, the controversial policy has further compromised the ecological balance of the Tibetan Plateau.

The exact beginning of nomadic pastoralism in Tibet is not known. Some experts cite evidence that Tibetans were raising livestock at least 4,000 years ago. Others claim 9,000 years. Whatever the case, it is clear that nomads have flourished sustainably on the Tibetan Plateau for a very long time. Indeed, until more recently, nomadic herding was likely the only way that humans could possibly have lived on Tibet's cold, arid highlands.

It is cruel irony that nomads have been made scapegoats of China's environmental woes, purportedly relocated in order to preserve Tibet's grasslands. In reality, nomads are an integral part of the ecology of the Tibetan Plateau and can play a vital, ongoing role in the maintenance of this globally significant ecosystem.

According to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, the world's grasslands hold around one fifth of the world's soil carbon. Grasslands are a source of livelihoods and food security for some one billion people worldwide. Furthermore, pastoralists play a critical role in managing grasslands and maintaining the soil carbon.

"Not only are the policies threatening one of the world's last systems of sustainable pastoralism, but scientific evidence shows that these policies are threatening the survival of the rangelands and Tibet's biodiversity."



A nomadic family's tent and animals in Amdo, eastern Tibet. Photo by Kunchok Gyaltsen.

Tibet is one of the world's most important grassland ecosystems. Tibet's grasslands cover around 1,650,000km² — more than half the Tibetan Plateau. The Chinese Government is right that Tibet's grasslands are degrading. But fundamentally wrong that this is due to traditional nomadic herding.

Nomads move between summer and winter pastures, grazing only lightly so that the grasslands can regenerate for the following year. They have a remarkably sophisticated knowledge of their environment, and their lives are governed by its rhythms. The nomads and their herds have long been an important component in the grassland ecosystem. The animals' waste adds nutrients to the soil and maintains its fertility. As they move their hooves aerate the soil, pressing in seeds and burying dead plant matter, which is broken down by microorganisms. All this helps maintain the health of the grasslands and, importantly, generates soil carbon. When the nomads and their herds are removed, biodiversity declines and invasive species flourish.

As with its mining operations in Tibet, the Chinese Government has tried to obscure the effects of its relocation policies by heavily restricting access to media and refusing to allow independent fact-finding missions. Nonetheless, a number of recent reports have been able to document the social impacts of the Chinese Government's relocation policy, including increased living costs, loss of the ability to make a living, indebtedness, and the decimation of traditional community structures. These studies have offered a new way forward based, among other things, on proper recognition of the value of Tibet's traditional rural economy, on the protection and harnessing of traditional knowledge, and a people-centered approach to conservation. Tibet's nomads can and must be part of the solution to the challenges that Tibet now faces.

"If I could go back to herding, I would. But the land has been taken by the state and the livestock has been sold off so we are stuck here. It's hopeless." *Shang Lashi, former nomad from Kham*

"Our land, our precious environment, is being destroyed. There are Chinese mining projects everywhere, our grasslands are being degraded, nomads are no longer free to roam and continue their sustainable livelihoods. They are taking our plants, our Tibetan medicine, and making this into a commercial product. Because of what has happened to our land, many people do not have enough to eat. Their land has been taken away and compensation is not given or it is not enough for them to live." *Extract of a message from a group of young Tibetan students in eastern Tibet*

The forcible removal of nomads from their lands continues with Asian News International reporting on 21 October 2021, that "the Chinese authorities in Qinghai province are forcing Tibetan nomads to sign an agreement that transfers proprietorship of their traditional lands to the government." Nomads continue to protest the taking of their land and their forced relocation.

While the relocation of Tibet's nomads has been at the centre of many recent discussions on development in Tibet, it is by no means the only way in which China is reshaping Tibet. Under the 'Comfortable Housing' policy, rural Tibetans whose houses are deemed unsuitable are instructed to knock them down and rebuild, sometimes in new settlements. Compensation is often inadequate, and families are left with a host of new problems.

"People in the village are desperate about abandoning their homes and having to resettle. They don't have any other skills than farming, and won't have any herds or land worth speaking of anymore. How is the next generation going to survive as Tibetans?" *Tenzin Gyaltso, Ü-Tsang*

Another way is the education policy under which Tibetan children, including children of nomads, are regularly moved into boarding schools, and the local Tibetan schools have been ordered to close in many places. This alienates young Tibetans from their language, culture and family. The policies of 'Militarised Vocational Training' and 'Labour Transfer Scheme for Rural Labour' has led to many nomads entering the forced labour system.

Tibet's urban settlements are being transformed into modern Chinese cities, sometimes at the expense of sacred sites and Tibet's Buddhist heritage. New infrastructure is being built, but it is a mixed blessing. Reports of land grabs are common for road construction, hydropower, or by local governments pursuing lucrative property deals.

The Chinese Government has long encouraged Chinese workers, investors and merchants to migrate to Tibet, causing Tibetans to become marginalized and disempowered within their homeland. While the Government's attempts to pacify and tame Tibet through development may have had mixed success, they have undoubtedly consolidated state power and control.

Ultimately the question we must ask is development for whom? And on whose terms? The first step towards a more ecologically sustainably and socially equitable path for Tibet is to ensure that Tibetans themselves — those whose land and culture is at stake, and who lived successfully and sustainably in the land of snows — have the right to make their own choices.

Read our full report 'Tibet: An Environmental Challenge' at <https://www.atc.org.au/report-tibet-environmental-challenge/>