

Nomad Resettlement in Tibet

“Nomads remain beyond the reach of the state. Their economic self-sufficiency, mobility and traditional and religious outlook on life make them the most difficult people to integrate into the Chinese state.”

—A Tibetan former nomad,
As quoted in ICT Report, “Tracking the Steel Dragon,” available at: www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/tracking-steel-dragon

TIBET’S NOMADIC LIFESTYLE IS ONE OF THE LAST EXAMPLES in the world of sustainable pastoralism. For centuries, Tibetan nomadic herders have made a sustainable living uniquely adapted to the harsh conditions of the Tibetan plateau. An estimated 2.25 million Tibetan nomads live on the plateau, migrating with their herds of yak, sheep and goats according to the seasons of the year, and producing wool, butter, cheese, yogurt and meat (according to the May 2006 China Development Brief).

But the implementation of Chinese policies to settle Tibetan nomads, to resettle Tibetans in towns and villages, and to fence off areas of grassland threatens the survival of a way of life that is integral to Tibetan identity as well as the livelihoods of Tibetan nomads. Despite the stated



A new settlement site for Tibetan nomads in Darchen, in Ngari Prefecture (Chinese: Ali) in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Often new settlements, like this one, are far from community resources.

intention of rangeland conservation, the policies are also further threatening the survival of the rangelands and the unique biodiversity of the fragile high-altitude landscape.

Since the beginning of the Western Development Strategy in 1999-2000, the Chinese government has been implementing policies of settlement, land confiscation, and fencing of pastoral areas inhabited primarily by Tibetans, dramatically curtailing their traditional means of livelihood. Hundreds of thousands of Tibetan nomads have been required to slaughter their livestock and move into newly built housing colonies in or near towns, abandoning their traditional way of life. According to the Congressional Executive Commission on China, the total number of Tibetans moved into new housing by 2010 could be approximately 1.14 million—more than half the total number of Tibetan rural residents in the Tibet Autonomous Region at the time of the 2000 census. (For the full CECC report, see: 2007 CECC Annual Report available at www.cecc.gov.)

The ethos of the Western Development Strategy is to create conditions which will encourage poor rural workers to move to towns or cities, where they will apparently become workers and consumers in a new, ‘modern,’ economy. However, Tibetans who are settled often have to go into debt—without having an assured future livelihood, as often they have lost their livestock—to pay for part of the cost of housing or the fencing that will divide and enclose the grasslands. Some nomads are offered compensation packages when they are settled, though with no rangeland and negligible job prospects in a Chinese dominated economy, for many, the main concern is how long the compensation will last.

A key issue arising from the implementation of these policies is how nomads and farmers who have lost their land and livelihoods will make a sustainable living in the future, particularly given that they are ill-equipped to compete in the job market with the increasing number of more skilled Chinese workers. Development agencies active in remote parts of Tibet have reported to ICT that resettled nomads seldom receive training in new skills, and they often have no access to health or social welfare.

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One of the main impacts of the settlement of nomads has been a lack of social cohesion engendered by the traditional communal nomadic lifestyle. Unemployment is leading to community and family breakdowns, alcoholism, and crime. As grazing areas elsewhere, too, become scarce, disputes among Tibetan nomads are on the rise. Arguably Beijing's top-down approach to implementing policy has undermined traditional means of resolving these conflicts through the involvement of local figures of influence, such as Tibetan lamas.

The environmental impacts of Chinese rangeland policies are equally unsettling. Ironically, Beijing's policy of *'tuimu huancao'*, or 'withdraw from pasture to re-grow grassland' and the fencing of the grasslands may actually be contributing to further degradation. According to grasslands specialists, livestock must be mobile to prevent degradation of the environment and to maintain rangeland health, the basis of extensive grazing systems throughout the world. Traditionally, Tibet's grasslands were unfenced and nomads practiced seasonal migration, allowing sufficient time for replenishment of pastures. However, under the policies of relocation and fencing, remaining livestock are confined and their grazing land limited, leading to overgrazing and further degradation. (For more information on the Environment in Tibet, please see ICT's briefing paper "The World's 'Third Pole:' Tibet and Climate Change.")

According to a report by the Tibetan Government in Exile, "Tibetans traditionally have an intuitive respect for the natural limits of what the land can sustain... Rather than try to conquer nature, Tibetans have adapted their lifestyles to natural conditions. They are not driven by greed or a constant urge for increased yield, but by the needs of this generation and coming generations to survive—which means, in modern language, sustainability." (Full report available here: <http://www.tibet.net/en/index.php?id=95&rmenuid=11>.)

Fundamentally, the Chinese authorities regard nomadic pastoralism as 'unscientific' and in need of modernization, often attributing grasslands degradation in Tibetan areas to the 'unsophisticated' practices of Tibetan nomads. This perception, which focuses solely on the importance of economic development and depicts rangelands simply as a resource to sustain livestock, leads to the marginalization of expert Tibetan views on the management of the grasslands and does not take into account the values of indigenous pastoralists, nor the stake that nomads have in being the stewards of the land they depend upon.

Resettlement policies are generally completed without consultation or consent, and local people have no right to challenge them or refuse to participate. This is despite the fact that Chinese law requires that those who are to be moved off their land or are to have property confiscated must be consulted, and, if they are moved, compensated for their losses.

Officials cite environmental preservation and economic development as the leading drivers for nomad relocation; however, the additional element of administrative control over people's movements and lifestyles is also a key priority for authorities. Nomad policies represent the further consolidation of centralized power, extending Beijing's grasp to the far reaches of the Tibetan plateau. Additionally, most Chinese authorities share the viewpoint that if Tibetans become richer, their faith in religion and support for the Dalai Lama will fade, indicating the official line of ensuring political 'stability' by means of countering 'separatism' through development.

China has so far fallen behind in its efforts to stem the rate of grassland degradation and promote ecological sustainability among the nomadic population. Rangelands experts say that the reasons for this failure are complex, but center around inappropriate policies. Grassland degradation can only be halted and reversed by examining the forces that affect the people who are using the grasslands. Research must be participatory, involving local Tibetans, if it is to be meaningful: sustainable rangeland use throughout the western PRC ultimately depends on input and participation by local-level users of the land. Experts with long experience of working with Tibetan nomads say that there is a real risk that the nomad way of life will be undermined, even destroyed, due to modern notions of development based on faulty evidence, negative stereotypes, and untested assumptions.

For an in-depth picture of China's nomad policies in Tibet please see the following analysis available online: "Tracking the Steel Dragon" <http://www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/tracking-steel-dragon>, "Searching for Grass and Water: Tibet's Last Nomads" http://socialdocumentary.net/exhibit/Daniel_Miller/450, "Restoring the Grasslands?" <http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/3470-Restoring-the-grasslands->