



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Mass migration program highlights contested nomads' resettlement policies in Tibet

<https://www.savetibet.org/mass-migration-program-highlights-contested-nomads-resettlement-policies-in-tibet/>

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- China has announced the displacement of more than 1,000 Tibetans from a nature reserve in northern Tibet to a settlement site in Lhasa, describing it as the first “high-altitude ecological migration”. Framing the removal of Tibetans – along with other mass relocations across the Tibetan plateau - in terms of “conservation and protection” fundamentally disregards the essential role of Tibetans in sustaining the wildlife, the long-term health of the ecosystems, and the water resources that China and Asia depend upon.
- The state media also reported that fencing previously used to control and prevent movement of people across nomadic pastures in the reserve will now be removed – to ensure Tibetan antelopes can roam freely, not Tibetan herders. The fencing of the grasslands, an integral element of policy, had affected the mobility of the antelopes, which Tibetan nomads risked and sacrificed their lives to save in the 1990s when they were threatened with extinction due to poaching.
- The “ecological migration” program is part of a new approach to set up national parks on the Tibetan plateau, contingent upon the removal of Tibetans from the land. National park status is imposed from the top-down, situating the state as the sole agency of control, and ignoring the concerns and expertise of local people. These policies are increasingly contested even within the PRC.

In what the Chinese authorities describe as the "first high-altitude resettlement project for 'ecological migrants' in Tibet",¹ more than 1,000 Tibetans have been moved out of the vast Changtang (Chinese: Qiangtang) area, according to the Chinese state media, which published images of elderly Tibetans boarding yellow coaches to take them to a resettlement encampment. The Qiangtang National Nature Reserve is one of three major nature reserves stretching across the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Qinghai, and the resettlement appears to be consistent with plans of mass migration announced in 2017 to relocate about 130,000 people over the next three years.²

¹ Global Times, 'Over 1,000 Tibetans relocate from nature reserve to Lhasa', June 19, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1107477.shtml>

² The Forestry Department of the TAR published some alarming statistics on removal of herders and farmers from their land, stating: “Since this year (2017), Tibet Autonomous Region has been carrying out ecological relocation to farmers and herdsmen living in the ecological functional area above 4500 meters above sea level. [The authorities] plan to relocate about 130,000 people over the next three years”. “China Forestry Network”, September 1, 2017, “西藏41万平方公里土地成为自然保护区”, <http://www.forestry.gov.cn/main/441/content-1022657.html>

Xinhua also reported this week that workers had begun dismantling pasture fences in the Qiangtang National Nature Reserve in the Tibet Autonomous Region “to protect Tibetan antelopes and other rare animals in the reserve”.³ Dechen Lhundrup, deputy head of the county forestry police, was cited as saying: "Thanks to the relocation of local residents to Lhasa, the fences are no longer needed." The fencing was an integral element of China's land-use policies in the grasslands; the habitat and mobility of migratory Tibetan antelopes have been threatened by large-scale poaching and fencing of the grasslands.

In describing the Tibetans being relocated as "ecological migrants", China seeks to convey the impression that its policies are aimed at environmental conservation, climate change adaptation and mitigation. Removing nomadic pastoralists from the grasslands they have protected for centuries is framed by the Chinese leadership in terms of environmental protection – although the opposite is the case. Tens of thousands of Tibetan nomads have been settled despite a growing scientific consensus in China and beyond that indigenous stewardship and herd mobility are essential to the health of the rangelands and help to mitigate climate change.

Matteo Mecacci, President of the International Campaign for Tibet, said, "The Chinese government policy of mass relocation of Tibetan nomads, continues to fall short of meeting international human rights standards, by not involving Tibetan nomads in the decision making process and therefore represents a concrete threat to the existence of an ancient civilization. The Chinese government also falsely portrays these efforts as aimed at preserving Tibet's environment, while it is crystal clear that the biggest threats to Tibet's fragile ecosystem is certainly not posed by Tibetan nomads, but by Beijing development policies."

In the case of the iconic Tibetan antelopes (Tibetan: tsö), which were once Class One Protected Species under China's national legislation, their number plunged from one million to as few as 65,000-72,500 by the mid-1990s.⁴ In recent years, the antelope population has increased, according to a report by International Union for Conservation of Nature.⁵ They were protected primarily by the Tibetan nomads of and nearby pastures risking – and losing – their lives to protect the antelopes from

³ Xinhua, 'Fences dismantled in Tibetan nature reserve', June 16, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/16/c_137258788.htm. Also see: Xinhua, 'Relocation changing lives on the Tibetan plateau', June 20, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/20/c_137267981_2.htm

⁴ According to IUCN, "The population underwent a severe decline in the 1980s and early 1990s as a result of commercial poaching for the valuable underfur, leading to an estimated 65,000-72,500 by the mid-1990s (George B Schaller, 'Wildlife of the Tibetan Steppe', July 1998, University of Chicago Press)." IUCN further noted that rigorous protection has been enforced since then, with George B Schaller later suggesting there may be 100,000 in 2008. See: IUCN Red List for threatened species at <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/15967/0>. IUCN states: "The species was recently assessed as Near Threatened on the Chinese National Red List of Vertebrates. It is also assessed as Near Threatened here, because the current status can only be maintained with continued high levels of protection in its natural range and strict controls on trade and manufacture of the shawls made from its underfur: any relaxation in the protection regime are predicted to result in a rapid population decline due to commercial poaching at a rate meeting the threshold for a threatened category".

⁵ Good news for Giant Panda and Tibetan Antelope <https://www.iucn.org/news/species/201609/four-out-six-great-apes-one-step-away-extinction-%E2%80%93-iucn-red-list>

hunters.⁶ This was documented in the movie, 'Kekexili: Mountain Patrol'.⁷ In 2015, China in fact announced that because their numbers had increased, the Tibetan antelope was no longer an endangered species.⁸

The developments follow a controversial decision a year ago to give the bordering area of Hoh Xil (Tibetan: Achen Gangyap) nature reserve UNESCO World Heritage status, despite concern about the displacement of Tibetan nomads from their pastures to urban areas across the plateau.⁹ The UNESCO World Heritage Committee reconvenes for its annual session next week (June 24-July 4) in Bahrain, and Tibet will once again be on the agenda, this time regarding the threat to Lhasa's cultural heritage.¹⁰

The role of Tibetans, particularly nomads, in preservation of the land and its wild animals, and the need for their free movement, was recognized by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and international conservation body the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) during discussion last year over the status of the Hoh Xil nature reserve, which adjoins the Changtang in the Tibet Autonomous Region.¹¹

A Xinhua report justifies the relocation of the more than 1,000 Tibetans from two villages in the Qiangtang region by citing deputy head of the regional forestry bureau Dzungga saying: "In the previous location, there are little oxygen and public facilities, and life expectancy is lower than the region's average.' [...]The relocation program [to a lower altitude area] helps to improve local people's lives and reduce human activities that might harm the fragile environment in the nature reserve, Dzungga said."¹²

Many of the Tibetans relocated from the Changtang may welcome relocation to an area with facilities in Lhasa; images in the state media showed them queuing to see a doctor the day after arrival. But in the systematic drive towards urbanisation and settling a predominantly rural population in Tibetan

⁶ Expert on Tibet's environment Gabriel Lafitte writes: "It was only in the 1990s that a small bunch of Tibetans based in Drito, distressed at the slaughter, formed a posse to hunt the hunters. Although they were determined to confront the Chinese Muslim miner/hunters, what legal authority did they have? The rangers were based in Drito just east of Kokoshili, a county (and town) whose Tibetan name means source of the Yangtze River (Dri Chu in Tibetan). Kokoshili, to the west, was where they had always taken their herds in summer [...] In the 1990s, a miracle happened: the Tibetans on the eastern fringes of Kokoshili mobilised, inspiring a worldwide movement of environmentalists inspired by the heroism of the Tibetan rangers, successfully halting and reversing the slide to extinction." NATURAL AND CULTURAL WORLD HERITAGE in KOKOSHILI/HOH XIL: TIBET'S EMPTY QUARTER OR HUMAN LANDSCAPE? Blog 1 of 2 on the decision facing UNESCO World Heritage Committee in the first week of July 2017, <http://rukor.org/kokoshilihoh-xil/>
⁷ By Lu Chuan in 2004, "Kekexili: Mountain Patrol" (Columbia Pictures/Warner);

⁸ Tibetan antelope struck from endangered list http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/01/c_134372291.htm

⁹ International Campaign for Tibet report, 'Nomads in 'no man's land': China's nomination for UNESCO World heritage risks imperiling Tibetans and wildlife', June 30, 2017, <https://www.savetibet.org/nomads-in-no-mans-land-chinas-nomination-for-unesco-world-heritage-risks-imperilling-tibetans-and-wildlife/>

¹⁰ The International Campaign for Tibet will publish a report on June 25 detailing the new threats to Lhasa's heritage, coinciding with the opening of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee meeting.

¹¹ International Campaign for Tibet report, 'UNESCO approves controversial World Heritage Tibet nomination despite concerns', July 7, 2017, <https://www.savetibet.org/unesco-approves-controversial-world-heritage-tibet-nomination-despite-concerns/>

¹² Xinhua, 'Tibet relocates villagers living in high-altitude nature reserve', June 18, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/18/c_137263200.htm. The state media article reported that: "Residents from two villages located in Qiangtang national nature reserve at an altitude of more than 5,000 meters completed their two-day journey and settled at an area 27 kilometers from the regional capital Lhasa, at an altitude of 3,800 meters."

areas, their future can be precarious, with no guarantee of future livelihoods for Tibetan nomads who are removed to urban areas. In relocations across the plateau, Tibetan nomads who are compelled to settle have not been granted compensation or future security of livelihood.

Indicating the continued emphasis on nomad settlement in the TAR, a new set of figures released by the authorities indicated a year on year decrease of 4 per cent on the livestock population.¹³

New policies emphasize vast areas of Tibet to be national parks

The relocation of Tibetans from Qiangtang National Nature Reserve follows news last year of a ban on visitors to the area, according to an article in the English-language state media publication Global Times.¹⁴

Last year it was announced that vast areas of Tibet will be turned into ‘national parks’ - contingent upon the removal of Tibetans from their ancestral lands. An official report stated that 61 different nature reserves and national parks would be created in the TAR, covering more than 800,000 square kilometers. (August 25, 2017).¹⁵

The announcement of the establishment of national parks in vast areas of Tibet rich in wildlife and biodiversity was based on the instructions of Xi Jinping on "ecological civilization".¹⁶

China Daily confirmed the aim to displace people in the area when it stated that a Third Pole National Park would be established "in the future after human interference is eliminated and the wild animal population increases."¹⁷ A settled population is easier for the Party authorities to control and administer. While Tibetans are locked out, security police are free to come and go in these areas. According to the Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Nature Reserves: "The public security organ of the region where the nature reserves are located may set up its dispatched agency within the nature reserves to maintain public security if necessary."¹⁸

¹³ The livestock population registered 18.67 million, a year-on-year decrease of 4 percent, according to China Tibet News, ‘GDP of China’s Tibet reaches 30.22 billion yuan in Q1’, June 13, 2018.

¹⁴ The circular “specifically mentions that people should not pass through the CNNR to reach two other state nature reserves”, Hoh Xil and Altan Shan. Global Times, ‘Tibet bans crossing of nature reserve’, citing Xinhua as the source, May 6, 2017 at: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1045641.shtml>. The November circular appears to be a reiteration of an earlier announcement in 2015, in which the state media underlined the intention to “share intelligence networks” among the three major nature reserves, although the circular issued last week is the first since Hoh Xil was granted UNESCO status in July (2017). International Campaign for Tibet report, Ban on access to nature reserves in Tibet raises concern about Tibetan nomads at UNESCO site’, December 11, 2017, <https://www.savetibet.org/ban-on-access-to-nature-reserves-in-tibet-raises-concern-about-tibetan-nomads-at-unesco-site/>

¹⁵ Forestry Department of the TAR, cited in: “西藏禁止和限制开发区域超80万平方公里，占全区面积70%”，http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1774568.

¹⁶ “China Tibet News”, August 24, 2017, “守护好青藏高原这方净土”，http://epaper.chinatibetnews.com/xzrb/html/2017-08/24/content_786024.htm.

¹⁷ “China Daily”, May 11, 2017, “National park proposed near lake reserve in Tibetan mountains”, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/travel/2017-05/09/content_29277809.htm. According to the article, the World’s Third Pole National Park will be established within Pelgon (Chinese: Ban’ge), Shentsa (Chinese: Shenzha), Nyima (Chinese: Nima) and Tsonyi (Chinese: Shuanghu district) counties in northern Nagchu, covering an area of 281,150 square kilometres.

¹⁸ Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Nature Reserves, 中华人民共和国自然保护区条例 [已被修订 CLI.2.10458(EN), Decree No. 167 of the State Council, 10-09-1994 includes the following: “Article 27. Nobody may be

In recent years, serious concerns about this policy direction have been raised within the PRC, as well as internationally. A growing number of Chinese professors and rangelands experts have become increasingly critical of government policies, arguing that a series of policy mistakes has caused overgrazing and degradation in Tibet's grasslands – not the nomadic pastoralists themselves. More than 200 research papers have been published in China documenting scientific findings that no longer confirm the dominant official narrative by the Chinese leadership.¹⁹

The notion of Tibet as an "ecological civilization" is connected to the strategic importance of Tibet and its landscape, now framed officially as an "Eco-environmental Security Shelter".²⁰ This is effectively an acknowledgement of Tibet's strategic importance as the earth's Third Pole, the largest repository of fresh water outside the North and South Poles, and a global climate change epicenter.²¹

allowed to enter the core zone of nature reserves. If it is necessary for the residents living in the core zone of a nature reserve to move out, the local people's government shall make proper arrangement to have them settled down elsewhere. Article 24. The public security organ of the region where the nature reserves are located may set up its dispatched agency within the nature reserves to maintain public security if necessary. Article 25. The units, residents in the nature reserves and the personnel allowed to enter into the nature reserves shall comply with various regulations of administration, and subject themselves to the management institutions of the nature reserves."

¹⁹ Tibet specialist Gabriel Lafitte details more than 200 scientific papers published in the PRC that support this conclusion, in a report for the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy, published on May 30, 2015 entitled "Wasted Lives: A critical analysis of China's Campaign to End Tibetan Nomadic Lifeways", <http://tchrd.org/wasted-lives-new-report-offer-fresh-insights-on-travails-of-tibetan-nomads/>. Lafitte writes: "Wherever there are pastoralists, there is now a fresh understanding that, far from being to blame for desertification, there are skillful stewards of drylands whose willingness to maintain mobility enables them to live productively and in environmentally sustainable ways from uncertain, unpredictable climates. In China, the biggest grassland country in the world, there are now Chinese scientists speaking up at every opportunity for the new paradigm, explaining how the old paradigm, of sedentarising nomads, has caused only perverse, unintended outcomes, chiefly the land degradation that is blamed on ignorant, uncaring, selfish nomads." In a New York Times article by Andrew Jacobs documenting these policies, Nicholas Bequelin, the director of the East Asia division of Amnesty International, said the struggle between farmers and pastoralists is not new, but that the Chinese government had taken it to a new level. "These relocation campaigns are almost Stalinist in their range and ambition, without any regard for what the people in these communities want," he said. "In a matter of years, the government is wiping out entire indigenous cultures." In: New York Times, July 11, 2015: "China Fences In Its Nomads, and an Ancient Life Withers", https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/world/asia/china-fences-in-its-nomads-and-an-ancient-life-withers.html?_r=0.

²⁰ An academic paper by Chinese scientists described this as follows: "The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (Tibetan Plateau) serves as an important shelter to safeguard China's environment and ecological system. Its vast area and lofty altitude have a strong bearing on the atmospheric circulation and climate pattern over the plateau and its surrounding regions. With numerous glaciers, large area of permafrost, a variety of lakes and a dozen of large rivers, it plays an important role in water source supply and conservation. Thanks to its vast grasslands and forests, the plateau constitutes a major carbon sink by absorbing a large amount of green-house gases." 'The Influence of Climate Change on the Function of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau as an Eco-environmental Security Shelter', Bulletin of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Vol.30 No.4 2016.

²¹ Encircled by high mountains and with an average elevation of 4,500 meters above sea level, the Tibetan Plateau is the largest and highest in the world and a global biodiversity hotspot. Known as the earth's Third Pole, it is a storehouse of freshwater and the source of the earth's eight largest river systems, Tibet is a critical resource to the world's 10 most densely populated nations surrounding the plateau. Tibet is a climate change epicenter that is warming nearly three times as fast as the rest of the earth. Its glaciers are melting, and its permafrost disappearing. And instead of seeking to protect this fragile high-altitude ecosystem and address the significant challenges it faces, China's policies are reshaping the Tibetan landscape with devastating consequences. See International Campaign for Tibet, December 3, 2015, "Blue Gold from the Highest Plateau: Tibet's water and Global Climate Change", <https://www.savetibet.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ICT-Water-Report-2015.pdf>.

Most of China's nature reserves are on the Tibetan plateau; upgrading to a national park not only has a higher status but is intended to give greater protection and investment in staff and programs to protect the natural values for which the area is famous. As the references to "ecological migration", however, make clear, this also implies greater restrictions for the local Tibetan population, particularly nomads and herders.

China has failed to provide adequate answers to the charges of extensive rights violations in its process of relocating Tibetans, ranging from the absence of consultation to the failure to provide adequate compensation, both of which are required under international law for evictions to be legitimate. In this case, as with others, there is no indication of free, prior and informed consent of the relocated Tibetans, as required by international law. Given the repressive policies of the Chinese authorities in Tibet, and past observations with regard to relocations of Tibetan herders and nomads, it is highly unlikely that their rights have been respected.

Tibetan herders in Qinghai made a rare appeal to the Chinese authorities last year after being banned from their traditional grazing grounds, saying that the orders were illegal in the context of Chinese law. The nomads, from a Tibetan area of Qinghai (Amdo) were forced to leave their summer pastures, with large fines being imposed on those who refused and threats of imprisonment. Referring to the issue of future livelihoods, the nomads wrote in a petition: "Taking away citizens' rights to pastureland is against the constitution, against national and local laws, and a major cause of damage to peoples' livelihood and way of life."²² The petition gave six cogent reasons why the nomads should not be removed from their summer pastures, including that there is no reason to take pastoralists off the land to achieve "a moderately prosperous society for the masses", a goal of economic development that has been stated by the authorities. The Tibetans argue that if this is the objective, "The output generated by the existing nomadic means of livelihood based on the rearing of cattle needs to be the basis. This needs to be supported by modern science. Opportunities to expand livestock commerce, butter and cheese production, markets for spun and woven yak wool, hair etc., need to be provided based on the need of today's people, rather than moving the pastoralist population into towns and cities where they will become like "deer in the fog", bereft of livelihood or life-direction."

²² International Campaign for Tibet report, 'Tibetan nomads make rare appeal against removal from grasslands', September 5, 2017, <https://www.savetibet.org/tibetan-nomads-make-rare-appeal-against-removal-from-grasslands/>