



SOLUTIONS FOR TIBET AND FOR PLANETARY HEALTH

Number 8 in a series of 10 briefings on climate and Tibet

BRIEFINGS in this series have named the many harmful impacts on Tibet of global climate warming, and official policies which blame nomads and shut them out of their grasslands.

The problems are many, global and local, due to misunderstanding and a prejudice that nomads are uncivilised, of low human quality.

However, it is not too late to repair Tibet and so guarantee once more the many environmental services Tibet provides for all of downstream and downwind Asia, from Pakistan through SE Asia to China and even Japan and Korea. The degrading pastures, eroding watersheds, dying turf, exposed black soils of Tibet can all be rehabilitated before more damage is done.

The only people who know how to inhabit the whole of Tibet are the nomads. For 8800 years they steadily expanded the rangelands of Tibet, making extensive use of all land between the lakeshores and the upper limit of vegetation below the mountain peaks. Only by working with the nomads can the land of Tibet be spared death by desertification, erosion and blizzard. Only by understanding nomads as careful risk managers can new approaches work.

One outcome of Copenhagen is finance for developing countries to reduce emissions. China is pressing hard its right to be paid to introduce energy efficient technologies. China can also invest much, in Tibet, in what it calls its “water tower”, to rehabilitate the land and lift nomads out of poverty. China can learn much from other countries which have begun to respect their nomads, no longer seeing them as unproductive and even as environmentally destructive.

New partnerships begin with learning to listen to the nomads, to appreciate their intimate knowledge of a land of thousands of plateaus, alpine and basin, summer and winter pastures, seasonal cycles, and the dynamics of the grasslands. On the basis of shared knowledge, nomadic and scientific, new policies can turn nomads from problem to solution.

How, in practical terms, can this be done? It begins with understanding the riskiness of nomadic life. The ongoing mobility of herds is essential to making best use of grass as it grows in season, while leaving enough for wild herds and for long term sustainability. This is risky, in a land where sudden unseasonal blizzards and gales occur, hailstorms can devastate crops in seconds, snowstorms can wipe out whole herds.

Nomads will not reduce their herd size—their only wealth, and insurance against disaster— unless the riskiness of their livelihoods can be reduced. In China, there is no social security, no social safety net when illness strikes a family, especially in rural areas. In a capitalist economy, users pay upfront, in full, or are not admitted to hospital. The only insurance is to save, and in Tibet savings are on the hoof. The World Bank has shown that Mongolian nomads can join insurance schemes established, at modest cost, by the central authorities, which ensure nomads can recover from disaster. The World Bank model has shown it is possible to establish insurance which is affordable both for the state and the nomads, has low administrative costs, is immune to exaggerated claims, and succeeds in giving nomads security.

With security of herds, nomads also need secure access to land. Chinese policy in the 1980s and 1990s was to guarantee secure, officially certified access to traditional grazing lands with long term tenure for many decades to come. China's farmers were given similar security of tenure in the 1980s. Although the issuing of certificates to nomads was slow, it did happen, and was intended to give the nomads incentives to care for their land. But as the 21st century began, official, policy reversed, certificates were torn up and the nomads excluded. Rehabilitation of degrading grasslands begins with trust building, enabling nomads and officials to work as partners. Now in China urban land can be privately owned, bought and sold, but rural land remains in state hands. The state can once more guarantee nomadic access to land, both pasture for overwintering and for mobile summer grazing in the alpine meadows. This means reversing the new policy of *tuimu huancao*, “closing pastures to restore grasslands”. It also means supporting mobility rather than current policy of persuading and pushing nomads to settle, with the inevitable result that herds fenced into fixed areas trample and destroy pasture.

With security, insurance and trust, rehabilitation can succeed. Native grasses can be sown onto bare black earth before gales and blizzards blow it away. Mobility is the key. If China, with international help, pays nomads to maintain mobility, and for some to regrow pasture, several objectives are achieved. China achieves its official objective of raising rural incomes, increasing domestic demand and alleviating poverty. With fewer fences and greater mobility, biodiversity protection is achieved, since migrating herds of antelope and gazelle also need mobility and plenty of room. With skilful mobile pastoralism China's watersheds are protected, degradation halted and then reversed. An active partnership between officials and nomads makes for trust and mutual respect, achieving China's primary goal of stability and harmony.

Other international institutions, including the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, and the European Union, have shown, on the ground, in Tibet, how to build fruitful partnerships with Tibetan nomads and farmers, which succeed in

conserving nature, rehabilitating degraded areas, improving productivity and increasing the incomes of rural Tibetans, all of which are official Chinese policy objectives. The FAO team reported in 2006 on years of careful planning and consultation with Tibetans to design projects in which nomads are not the enemy of China's watershed conservation. The FAO says: "Pastoral risk management has to be incorporated into the mainstream of government development strategy. The success of watershed conservation depends on positive herder involvement. Recommended actions are: Increased government investment. Subsidy payments to farmers should include an element for supporting the maintenance of particular types and characteristics of landscape. If the government wants to protect the watershed areas in order to secure downstream land uses, and protect towns from flooding, it is right that upstream land users and especially herders should be subsidised to achieve this. Build up partnerships between government organisations and herder and community organisation. The community associations are better equipped to manage some aspects of pastoral risk management than government."

Tragically, China not only ignored these proposals but made the Tibetan nomadic victims of climate change and policy failure to blame, to be dealt with by exclusion.

No-one has ever managed to live on the grasslands of Tibet, other than the Tibetan nomads. Chinese settlers stay in the new towns, subsidised by central funding. Chinese farmers have been unable to settle Tibet. The only productive use of this enormous grassland of millions of sq kilometres is by mobile pastoralist herders whose whole way of life is adapted to mobility.

Why is it important that the open rangelands of Tibet continue to have human uses? The only alternative is to shrink human habitation to urban enclaves, transport corridors and mines, where human impacts are concentrated and destructive. In the fragile, challenging environment of Tibet, ongoing human use means a move away from exploitation, back to sustainability. Nomads maintained a subsistence economy, with few surpluses. Wild herds mingled freely with the yaks, sheep, goats and horses of the nomads. Fences were unnecessary.

The future of Tibet is as a provider of environmental services to the planet, of river water and monsoon rains to the whole of Asia, as a carbon sink covered by grasses which capture more carbon than the herds produce. An unspoiled Tibetan Plateau can continue to provide a wide range of environmental services, even as the climate warms, if there is investment in repairing the degraded grasslands before the damage is out of hand. Some areas of this earth are best suited to providing environmental services rather than industrial production, and this is true of Tibet.

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Also see readings listed in the Briefing paper on Nomads

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