

Collaborative land management in the Tibetan grasslands, China

28 Oct, 2010



Country: China

Themes: Community conservation / sustainable land management / protected areas / local participation / empowerment and equity

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[Source: <http://www.lead.org/page/573>. Accessed 9 July 2011.]

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The Tibetan Plateau is home to great biodiversity and the source of 3 major Asian rivers which influence 40% of the world's population. The Plateau is also home to traditional communities of nomadic pastoralists. National and international attempts to manage and conserve arid and semi-arid grasslands have historically come into conflict with the lives and livelihoods of the local herders, such as found on the Tibetan Plateau. Local communities of Tibetan herders also face development problems as their traditional way of life collides with China's rapid globalisation and urbanisation. However, community-

led, multi-stakeholder partnerships have led the way towards more sustainable and people-centric conservation.

The grasslands are a severe environment suited only to small-scale pastoralism traditionally practised by nomadic herders. Recent policies that reduced the mobility of these communities may have encouraged unsustainable grazing practices, leading to dangerous problems of soil erosion. Coupled with regional climate change, this land degradation places the sources of three major rivers under serious threat, potentially leading to an international crisis. Local wildlife, such as Tibetan wild yak, wild ass (kiang), snow leopard, and black-necked crane, also has been endangered by poaching. However, national attempts at conservation, such as implementation of the 'rangeland to grassland' policy (giving the land a decade of rest from grazing) can disrupt local pastoral livelihoods.

By way of example, several innovative community-led initiatives have begun over the past decade in the headwaters, or source area, of the Yangtze River – from the establishment and on-going development of a local, grassroots non-government organization; to the trialling of a 'community co-management' partnership with a national nature reserve; to the creation of a 'herders cooperative' that can assist local people to mobilize their efforts and to coordinate economic development activities in rural grassland areas.

The Upper Yangtze Organisation (UYO) is a partnership that was founded by local herdsmen in the late 1990s and now is working with national and international NGOs as well as local and regional government to put local people at the centre of conservation and land management. Most forms of pastoralism practised by local herdsmen in western China, as around the world, have long been scorned by government as backward and unproductive, requiring little skill or effort. Yet local herdsmen have in fact built up vital land management expertise over their long history of survival in such difficult environments. In the Tibetan herding context, the UYO helps give that expertise a voice and ensure that the local herder community is not seen as a problem but as part of the solution.

To this end, teams of local herders have been recruited, trained and equipped to spearhead a community approach to conservation. They help to promote sustainable land use, monitor the population of local wildlife species and carry out anti-poaching patrols, as well as raising local awareness about conservation at community gatherings, festivals and schools. The scheme has become a model for regional conservation, endorsed by a nature reserve the size of England and Wales combined, and has since been replicated in several communities beyond the pilot community of Suojia. This approach is now recognized under an umbrella of 'community co-management,' with discussion presently underway at high levels as to its possible expansion across much of the province.

Such a community-centred approach to conservation also can create paths to development. Pastoral and traditionally nomadic communities often struggle with low levels of education and healthcare. In Suojia, until recently very few people received even a basic education, with over 95% of the female population illiterate. They also suffer from extremely low levels of health, particularly amongst women and children. Historically, government has found the extension of social services to remote areas too problematic. As a result, tens of thousands of families are now moving off the land, to the periphery of

towns or to new settlements, yet with little real hope of successfully adapting to such new environments and livelihoods. This has started to create inner-city type problems even in small towns, with high levels of poverty, unemployment and crime.

An alternative is to work with local herders, in the grassland environment (not in new towns); such as has been promoted by 'community co-management'-style approaches to conservation and sustainable development. Most recently, the concept of a 'herders cooperative' has been approved by government, and in at least one Tibetan herding community in the source area of the Yangtze River, effective mobilization for joint action is taking place (over twenty households at present). Environmentally-sensitive options for economic development including tourism are being explored, and urban-rural partnerships are being discussed as well – all under the auspices of the newly formed Kegawa Herders Cooperative.

Plateau Perspectives, an international organization focused on promoting conservation and community development in the Tibetan Plateau region of China, has worked towards such alternative solutions for over a decade. Their work has included capacity building of the above organizations and institutions as well as more direct, sustained action. In addition to the above, Plateau Perspectives has assisted its partners, both government and non-government, to help improve education and healthcare for local herding communities. Specialists spent more than two years speaking and listening to the community, developing an understanding of their needs and anxieties with regards to health and education. This type of community-led development can be a slow process of trial and error – for example, the first tent school moved several times as the community tried to decide the best central location – but the result is a powerful sense of ownership; until higher level education policy changed dramatically a couple years ago, the school remained an outstanding example of a successful community-operated venture.

These projects have helped to demonstrate that Tibetan herders can not only live sustainably on the grasslands, but can actually contribute much to the conservation of biodiversity. In conjunction, they have also shown that indigenous or ethnic minority communities can receive good healthcare and education services without needing to abandon their traditional homes and livelihoods. Several key organisations or institutions, as well as key individuals, have made huge progress in changing attitudes to these pastoralists and have been rewarded with national and international recognition of the value of community-led approach to conservation and land management.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Effective conservation and land management must consider cultural and social issues.
- Rural communities should be considered an asset, part of the solution for conservation, rather than as problems or obstacles to overcome.
- Developing more community-centred approaches to biodiversity conservation can also lead to empowerment, and greater opportunities and benefit for social development.
- Developing genuine partnerships with local communities may require that a more holistic view be adopted by NGOs, incorporating both conservation and development needs.
- Sufficient time needs to be spent (sometimes several years) to attain long-lasting results.