



ISSUE

Tibet—Climate Action for the Roof of the World

The Tibetan Plateau is an environmentally strategic area. And as the world focuses on climate action at the United Nations COP23 meetings, Tibet must be central to any discussion on climate change.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama said: “This blue planet is our only home and Tibet is its roof.”

The Tibetan Plateau both faces the impacts of climate change and exacerbates the effects of global climate change. The Tibetan Plateau needs to be protected, not just for Tibetans but for the health and sustainability of the entire world.

II. Background

1. Tibet and Climate Change

The importance of Tibet to the world’s environmental health cannot be overstated.

The Tibetan Plateau, with an average elevation of more than 4000 meters above sea level covering an area of 2.5 million square kilometers, is the highest and largest plateau on earth. After the Arctic and Antarctic, the Tibetan Plateau is the planet’s “Third Pole” with 46,000 glaciers and the third-largest store of ice.

Tibet is the water tower of Asia. The third largest number of glaciers in the world and the extensive permafrost make the Tibetan Plateau the head source of Asia’s six largest rivers supporting more than 1.3 billion people. And due to its elevation, vast area and glacial cover, the Plateau influences the timing and intensity of monsoons.

2. Climate Change

Tibet is facing the impact of climate change with rapidly retreating glaciers, deteriorating permafrost, degrading grasslands and increasing desertification. The mismanagement of Tibet’s fragile ecosystem by the Chinese government has exacerbated climate change.

The Tibetan Plateau has seen an increase in temperature of approximately 0.3 degrees Celsius every ten years. This means that over the past 50 years the temperature has increased by 1.3 degrees Celsius—three times the global average.

Over the past 50 years, 82 per cent of the ice has retreated. At this rate, the Chinese Academy of Science estimates that two-thirds of the glaciers will be gone by 2050. There has been no net accumulation of ice since the 1950s and the melting season now comes earlier and lasts longer. The alpine permafrost is also at risk and plays a critical role for the health of the planet.

The alpine permafrost on the Tibetan Plateau stores about 12,300 million tonnes of carbon but 10 per cent of it has degraded in the past decade. Tibet is also facing increased desertification. The United Nations Development Program reports that Tibet’s grasslands are turning into desert at a rate of 2,330 square kilometers per year.

Damming leads to heavy loss of water through evaporation and causes significant decrease in river water volume in downstream countries. Tibetan rivers (names in English/ Tibetan: Yangtze/ Driчу, Yellow/Machu, Mekong/ Zachu, Salween/Gyalmo Ngulchu, Indus/Senge Khabab and Brahmaputra/Yarlung Tsangpo) flowing into the 10 most-densely populated nations in the world, directly support more than 1.3 billion people and 40 per cent of the world’s population depends on Tibetan rivers. China has dammed every major river and their tributaries in Tibet. And more damming happening across Tibet.

The impact of climate change is being most seriously felt on the Tibetan Plateau. But the Plateau also plays a critical role in reversing the effects of climate change. A global environmental catastrophe can be avoided. It is well past the time for world to recognize the paramount significance of the Tibetan Plateau to the environmental health and sustainability of the planet.

III. Recommendations

Rights of the Nomads should be respected

1. Around the world, governments are increasingly recognizing that pastoral nomadic mobility holds the key to sustainability on the dry lands of the world. Unfortunately, China's grassland policies and laws restrict the flexibility and mobility of Tibetan nomads. Nomads are being forced off their lands and into large scale settlements. To date more than two million people have been moved.

Tibetan nomads are the expert custodians of the alpine pastures and their traditional knowledge and experience must be incorporated into climate mitigation and adaptation practices. The local Tibetan community, including nomads, should be directly involved in decision-making processes based on a principle of collaborative management attending to their needs.

2. Cross-boundary Cooperation on Climate Change Research on the Tibetan Plateau

Independent, international scientific assessments of the impact of the Tibetan Plateau's ecosystems, ecosystem services and land-use policies must be undertaken to fully understand the critical contribution of the Plateau to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

IV. What You Can Do

1. World Leaders at COP23

The Central Tibetan Administration urges world leaders gathering in Bonn to recognize Tibet's importance to the environmental health of the planet and to make Tibet central to global climate change discussions.

The international community must hold the Chinese government to account so that China both fulfills already-stated commitments and sincerely work on protection of Tibet's environment. The international community must support Tibetans in being the stewards of their own lands.

2. People's Republic of China

The Central Tibetan Administration welcomes China's commitment to cap carbon emission by 2030. However, the current rapid expansion of mega hydropower dams on Tibetan rivers should be curtailed. These mega hydropower projects will cause serious, irreversible environmental damage to Tibet's fragile ecosystem and affect billions in China and beyond.

- National Nature Park

As a positive sign, the Chinese government has been declaring more and more national parks and nature reserves across Tibet in recent years.

For formulation of any such laws and policies, the Tibetan cultural sentiments and local knowledge should be considered. The life of Millions of Tibetans who live in the areas declared nature reserves should not be undermined. People voice and needs should be listen to and respected. ". China must fairly and rigorously enforce its new Environmental Protection Law. China must consult with and take into consideration the views and needs of local Tibetans.

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