



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 COP21 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.

Background

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 metres 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 supplying 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.

Climate Change

Tibet is facing the impact of climate change with rapidly retreating glaciers, deteriorating permafrost, degrading grasslands and increasing desertification. And 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 kilometres per year.

Damming leads to heavy loss of water through evaporation and causes significant decrease in river water volume in downstream countries. This water loss contributes to the release of greenhouse gases leading to climate change. Tibetan rivers (names in English/ *Tibetan*: Yangtze/*Drichu*, 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 is expected. In China's 12th Five-Year Plan, hydropower projects have been prioritized.

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 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.

Recommendations

COP21

The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) wants to see a strong climate change agreement at the UN COP21 conference for the health and sustainability of the entire world. The CTA urges world leaders gathering in Paris to recognize Tibet's importance to the environmental health of the planet and to make Tibet central to global climate change discussions.

Nomads

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.

China's Environmental Protection Law

China's recently passed Environmental Protection Law includes mention of "autonomous regions" and the rights of people and organizations to establish local environmental quality standards and to "participate [in] and supervise the activities of environment protection".

The Law also stipulates "strict protection on key ecological functional zones and areas of sensitive and fragile ecological environment". This Law should be fairly and rigorously implemented in Tibet. It is a legal framework to hold the Chinese government to account.

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.

What You Can Do

Public Action

Show your solidarity for climate action for Tibet. Take the **"Roof of the World" photo challenge**. Groups and individuals can take a photo with arms above heads forming a roof with their hands. Share your photo on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook with a message:

*I support #climateaction for #Tibet
- the #RoofOfTheWorld at #COP21*

World Leaders at COP21

World leaders gathering in Paris must reach a strong climate change agreement for the environmental health and sustainability of the entire world. The Central Tibetan Administration urges world leaders gathering in Paris 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 actually takes action on climate change. The international community must support Tibetans in being the stewards of their own lands.

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. China must rigorously enforce its new Environmental Protection Law and China must consult with and take into consideration the views and needs of local Tibetans.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

See: tibet.net/COP21

Tibet—Climate Action for the Roof of the World:
Facts and Figures, Q&A and COP21 Backgrounder.

The *Tibet—Climate Action for the Roof of the World* campaign is an initiative of the Environment & Development Desk (Department of Information and International Relations) of the Central Tibetan Administration.