

Cultural rights and climate change

International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) submission to the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights

Negative impacts of climate change on culture and cultural rights

1. What negative impacts of climate change on culture, heritage and the enjoyment of cultural rights by all have been documented in your context? Are particular groups, such as women, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, rural persons or peasants, and youth or future generations, as well as cultural practitioners being impacted in specific and disproportionate ways? What efforts are being undertaken to inventory and monitor such impacts?

Tibetan nomads, who form a sizable population across the Tibetan plateau, have been greatly affected by the changes brought to their lives by the Chinese government in the name of combatting climate change.

Over centuries, Tibetan nomads acquired complex knowledge about the environment in which they lived and upon which their lives depended. This was the foundation on which a vibrant nomadic culture developed.¹

In 2000, China announced its "Western Development Strategy" purportedly to improve the life of the people in the western region, and as part of this strategy, they decided to relocate the Tibetan nomads in order to protect the important headwaters region.²

Subsequently, based on the available data on explicitly nomadic populations, as of 2019, at least 1.8 million nomads have been resettled into sedentary houses under various Chinese government policies. Given the significant gaps in the data, this is an extremely conservative figure.³

Such policies were implemented despite a growing scientific consensus in China and beyond that indigenous stewardship and herd mobility are essential to the health of the rangelands and

¹ Daniel J Miller, "The World of Tibetan Nomads," accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://case.edu/affil/tibet/documents/TheWorldofTibetanNomadsSept14.pdf>

² Sean Gallagher, "The Last Nomads of the Tibetan Plateau," Pulitzer Center, October 25, 2012, accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/last-nomads-tibetan-plateau>

³ Data corroborated from Chinese state media reports, e.g. China Daily, 6 July 2012: 'Over 1 million Tibetan nomads choose settlement', accessed on May 27, 2020, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-07/06/content_15555645.htm or Xinhua, 1 December 2012: 'Massive nomad settlement to protect "mother river"', accessed on May 27, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/90882/8041990.html>.



help to mitigate climate change.⁴ In describing the nomads being relocated as “ecological migrants”, China seeks to convey the impression that its policies are aimed at environmental conservation, climate change adaptation and mitigation.

However, analysts have said that the inability of many of the nomads to adapt to life in the townships have left them in no-man’s land, culturally and socially.⁵ One researcher came back after studying the situation of Tibetan nomads and said, “a traditional way of life that has existed for thousands of years on the highland grasslands of the Tibetan plateau is on the brink of disappearing, perhaps forever.”⁶

2. Are cultural sites or resources which are critical to participation in cultural life identified as being threatened due to climate change and if so, how? What processes are used to analyse the risk of harm or inaccessibility to these areas and resources? Are records being kept about these risks and impacts?

The Amnye Machen mountain range located in the Golog (Chinese: Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai is one of Tibet's most sacred mountains, revered by both Buddhists and Bon adherents.⁷ The protector deity Machen Pomra is believed to reside on Amnye Machen and the pilgrimage circuit around the mountain is popular among Tibetans.

Since 2008, Tibetan yak-herders under the auspices of the Amnye Machen Nomadic Herder Environmental Protection Society⁸, have been ascending Amnye Machen twice a year to monitor the retreat of the glaciers. Their measurements show that two of its most prominent glacial terminuses have been retreating on average 27 meters a year.⁹

The nomads, however, blamed the newly constructed highway and tunnel nearby, rather than the obvious climate change. They say the dust and pollution from the construction has been causing the glacier to melt faster.

3. Please provide examples of specific natural resources, local sites used for cultural practices or seasonal patterns that influence the ability to participate in diverse aspects of cultural life that may be subject to volatility due to climate change. Consider also diffuse geographical features or resources that may be at risk and are definitive or influential in the practice and development of culture on either a collective or individual basis.

⁴ “Mass migration program highlights contested nomads’ resettlement policies in Tibet,” International Campaign for Tibet, June 21, 2018, accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://savetibet.org/mass-migration-program-highlights-contested-nomads-resettlement-policies-in-tibet/>.

⁵ “As China forges ecological future, Tibetans relinquish nomadic past,” Reuters, September 26, 2019, accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-environment-resettlement-tibeta/as-china-forges-ecological-future-tibetans-relinquish-nomadic-past-idUSKBN1WB0C5>.

⁶ Sean Gallagher, “The Last Nomads of the Tibetan Plateau,” Pulitzer Center, October 25, 2012, accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/last-nomads-tibetan-plateau>.

⁷ “Amnye Machen,” Treasury of Lives, accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://treasuryoflives.org/institution/Amnye-Machen>.

⁸ Kyle Obermann, “Conservation China: Nomads and the Yellow River King,” May 1, 2020, accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://supchina.com/2020/05/01/conservation-china-nomads-and-the-yellow-river-king/>.

⁹ Ibid.



A study has found a decline in snow and ice on Mount Everest and the national park surrounding it.¹⁰ Although researchers have not yet established a firm connection between this decline and climate change, they suspect that the decline of snow and ice is from human-generated greenhouse gases altering global climate.

The Himalayan glaciers provide water for roughly 1.5 billion people, and are essential to the cultural survival of these downstream communities. A very stark example of changing glacier situation is that of the Rongbuk glaciers.

Mountaineer, photographer, and filmmaker David Breashears, started his Glacier Research Imaging Project and among its activities is to retrace the steps of some of the world's greatest mountain photographers as they took pictures over the past 110 years across the Himalaya and the Tibetan Plateau. Among these was the Rongbuk glacier below Mount Everest in Tibet, which he visited in 2007 and saw the change from the photo that another mountaineer had taken 86 years before. Breashears wrote¹¹, "The loss of these frozen reservoirs of water will have a huge impact, as the glaciers provide seasonal flows to nearly every major river system in Asia. From the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra in South Asia, to the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers in China, hundreds of millions of people are partially dependent on this vast arc of high-altitude glaciers for water. As the glaciers recede and release stored water, flows will temporarily increase. But once these ice reservoirs are spent, the water supply for a sprawling, overpopulated continent will be threatened, and the impacts on water resources and food security could be dire."

Positive potential of culture and cultural rights to enhance responses to climate change

4. What are ways in which culture and cultural resources, such as traditional knowledge, are being used to mitigate and/or adapt in the face of climate change? Where available, please share examples of best practices for applying traditional knowledge and cultural practices, such as those of indigenous peoples, peasants and fisher people, including traditional fire management and agricultural techniques that should be considered in developing mitigation and adaptation responses. What is being done to inventory and preserve such cultural resources that could be useful to addressing climate change?

Traditionally, Tibetan nomads have used their acute sense of understanding of the environment to adapt and survive under ecologically balanced conditions. For example, researcher Dan Miller says¹², "Nomads possess a great body of knowledge about the environment in which they live and the animals they raise for a living. Local climatic patterns and key grazing areas are

¹⁰ "Extensive glacial retreat observed in Mount Everest region," May 15, 2013, accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://watchers.news/2013/05/15/scientists-find-extensive-glacial-retreat-in-mount-everest-region/>.

¹¹ David Breashears, "Tracking the Himalaya's Melting Glaciers," Yale Environment, July 15, 2010, accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/tracking-the-himalaya-s-melting-glaciers>.

¹² Daniel J Miller, "The World of Tibetan Nomads," accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://case.edu/affil/tibet/documents/TheWorldofTibetanNomadsSept14.pdf>.



recognized, allowing herders to select favorable camp sites and winter ranges that provide protection from storms.”

5. What are the diverse legal frameworks, trends and practices at the national and international levels that promote intervention from across the cultural ecosystem, including by cultural rights defenders and cultural practitioners, as well as women, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, rural people and peasants, and youth, in addressing disparate impacts and influencing decisions around climate change mitigation and adaptation? What are the challenges to such inclusivity and how are they being addressed?

6. What opportunities are available for people to publicly engage in cultural life in ways that demonstrate contemporary cultural shifts in response to climate change? Are there currently visible signs of cultural change underway? What factors might impede such practice of cultural life?

7. In what capacities do experts from across the field of culture and climate interact and exchange knowledge at the national or international levels? For example, are experts from various cultural fields involved in relevant climate change policy? Are climate change experts engaging with the cultural sectors, and if so how?

Measures taken and recommendations

8. Are affected persons and groups being consulted and enabled to participate in discussions related to climate policy and climate action?

While, the Chinese government assert the relocation respects “the will of the Tibetan farmers and herders,” Tibetans coming from both farming and herding communities interviewed by Human Rights Watch¹³ between 2005 and 2012 say that large numbers of people relocated or rehoused did not do so voluntarily and that they were never consulted or offered alternatives.

9. Are cultural rights defenders who are working on climate-related harms to culture and cultural rights facing specific challenges in their work, and are they at particular risk of threats, harassment and human rights violations? If so, how should these human rights defenders be better protected and supported?

Karma Samdrup, a Tibetan philanthropist and founder of the Snowlands Three Rivers Environmental Protection Group, was prevented from continuing his environmental protection work after he was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment on June 24, 2010, on charges related to

¹³ “They Say We Should Be Grateful” Mass Relocating and Relocation Programs in Tibetan Areas of China, Human Rights Watch, June 27, 2013, accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/06/27/they-say-we-should-be-grateful/mass-rehousing-and-relocation-programs-tibetan>.



an incident of grave robbing in 1998, and for which he had been cleared of all suspicion of wrong-doing at the time.¹⁴

10. Has your country adopted specific regulations or measure to address the negative impacts of climate change on culture and cultural rights? If so, please specify the content of such regulation and measures. Is a human rights approach taken to these questions?

11. Are the impacts of climate policy and climate action on culture, cultural rights and human rights more broadly being assessed? What should be undertaken in future in this regard?

12. What opportunities or mechanisms, if any, for remedies and redress are being made available to respond effectively to the harm to culture and cultural rights caused by the climate crisis?

13. What national, regional and international initiatives are being undertaken to address the intersections of climate change, culture and cultural rights? How effective have such initiatives been, what primary challenges have they faced, and what additional efforts should be suggested in this regard?

14. What recommendations should be made to States and other stakeholders concerning these topics?

The nomadic community on the Tibetan plateau needs to be protected as they show a way of living in harmony with nature. For centuries, nomads adapted and accommodated to their environment, learning to live with what it offered instead of negatively impacting the environment.

The Chinese policy makers should realize that economic development should not be at the cost of extinction of a community's traditional lifestyle.

The Chinese authorities also should include the nomadic community in the decision-making about their future. There is the need for stakeholders and conservationists to monitor the planned national parks, and "the exclusion of local Tibetan customary guardians from their lands."¹⁵

The International Campaign for Tibet recommends to the Chinese government to

- Halt current nomadic resettlement programs, pending a comprehensive review of the policy outcomes and effectiveness.
- Revise the resettlement policy, and in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, under active participation and contribution from nomads, and

¹⁴ 'A sharp knife above his head': the trials and sentencing of three environmentalist brothers in Tibet, International Campaign for Tibet, August 4, 2010, accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://savetibet.org/a-sharp-knife-above-his-head-the-trials-and-sentencing-of-three-environmentalist-brothers-in-tibet/>.

¹⁵ Gabriel Lafitte, "Tibet: Nomads caught between climate change and government 'conservation'", Minority Rights Group, accessed on May 27, 2020, <https://minorityrights.org/tibet-nomads/>.

consider alternative sustainable methods to achieve development and environmental policy goals.

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