

Tibet: Enduring spirit, exploited land

R Z Apte and Andrés R. Edwards

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Enduring Spirit, Exploited Land describes the traditional lives of nomads and farmers and their practices in co-existing with the environment. The environmental ethic developed by the Tibetans over millennia now threatened by Chinese social system and development practices, and the massive transfer of Han Chinese into Tibet. These events have gained increased significance for the world as dependence on the natural resources reaches its limits.

The survival of the Tibetan culture and its environment has local, regional and global implications: The Tibetan Plateau is the source of Asia's major rivers that is the lifeline to millions of people throughout Asia. Tibet has been shown to influence weather conditions that affect the global climate patterns. The changes to the Tibetan environment through colonization have affected the livelihood of nomads and farmers. Moreover, the destruction of the Tibetan culture means a loss of an age-old earth-based wisdom of co-existing with the environment.

Through interviews with Tibetan nomads and farmers, Apte and Edwards document the significant changes to this previously pristine environment as a result of the ongoing impact of the Chinese presence. The overall picture makes it clear that what happens in Tibet, has a direct and crucial bearing on the lives of hundreds of millions of people in Asia living downstream from Tibet, and on the environmental balance of the world.

INTRODUCTION

Why Care about Tibet?

For much of this past century, Tibet has been glamorized as a Shangri-La...a place of impenetrable mystery, isolated on an exotic plateau on the roof of the world, where few Westerners ever managed to explore. More recently, however, this romantic image has given way to the reality of a landmass consisting of approximately one million square miles and a culture that has been oppressed and virtually obliterated by its powerful neighbor to the east. In the West, we are becoming increasingly aware of human rights abuses in Tibet by the Chinese government but we are less aware of the ongoing environmental destruction that has been occurring since the Chinese invasion almost fifty years ago.

China's hunger for development is wreaking havoc on the environment of the Tibetan Plateau and, in the process, destroying a culture which has, until recently, flourished under harsh conditions for thousands of years. However, the world community cannot expect to resolve the Tibetan situation by looking at Tibet in isolation, or even at only Tibet and China. In many respects, the situation we describe in *Tibet: Enduring Spirit, Exploited Land* serves as a microcosm of what is transpiring across the world. Tibet, like many other developing regions, is experiencing the effects of uncontrolled growth spurred by industrialized nations.

In order to understand Tibet's situation we need to view the issues in a regional, and even global, context and to look at how various issues are connected. The Tibetan human rights issue, for example, is connected to the political structure in China, which, in turn, is connected to population pressures, education, foreign trade, the viability of the environment, and numerous other factors. Because all these problems are interconnected, and since the relationships among them are constantly changing, we must consider the whole complex of problems simultaneously.

Tibetans, like other indigenous peoples, have always understood that their interdependence with the environment is essential to their survival and well-being. Seeing themselves as caretakers of the land, Tibetans have recognized their responsibility to maintain the balance of their ecology. The Tibetans' wisdom is based on a subsistence approach to using the land, coupled with a respect for

the limitations imposed by their environment. In the simplest terms, this means not wasting or abusing what nature provides, whether wildlife, vegetation, soil, water, or air. Their sensitive understanding of the links in the web of life gives nomads and farmers an appreciation for the recurring patterns in nature and the limitations of all systems.

One of the keys to Tibetan coexistence with the environment is to embrace a long-term view in making decisions, one which considers effects on succeeding generations as well as reflects the Buddhist acceptance of the cyclical nature of all living things. This approach, coupled with a keen knowledge of the natural world, has marked Tibetan experience through thousands of years. Nomads and farmers learned to listen to the land and perform activities that sustain, rather than deplete, the viability of ecosystems in the Tibetan Plateau.

As we prepare for the dawn of the twenty-first century, we may benefit by examining the values that have helped the Tibetan people thrive for millennia. The ecological practices embraced by Tibetans parallel our pressing global need to find a balance between our consumption and the earth's well-being.

The daunting challenges before us...including overpopulation, habitat destruction, ozone depletion, the greenhouse effect, and pollution...are all connected to destructive human activities. In our search for lasting solutions, cultures such as Tibet which have relied on a nature-based philosophy remain important markers in our transition towards cooperation and coexistence among ourselves and with the environment. Our current crisis requires creative approaches which protect diverse cultures that have successfully coexisted with the land.

It is our intention to show the remarkable tenacity and ingenuity with which the Tibetan nomads and farmers have been able to thrive in this unique region of the world. We pay tribute to these rugged pastoralists and farmers who have acquired an earth-based wisdom. With a thorough knowledge of their environment, Tibetans have developed skills which have sustained them for generation after generation.

The material in *Tibet: Enduring Spirit, Exploited Land* is drawn from an oral history project completed by the authors and a team of Tibetans. In 1993 we conducted a series of interviews with Tibetan refugees now living in India, Nepal, and the United States. The experiences described by former nomads and farmers illustrate daily life on the Tibetan Plateau, providing an overview of the culture, the lifestyle in various regions of Tibet, and the relationship of Tibetans to their environment.

As we grapple with problems facing us in the next millennium, Tibetans stand like an endangered species, their survival threatened by denuded forest environments and eroded soil and nutrients. By understanding the impact of our actions and inactions, and by reversing the present trend, we can rebuild the soil, replenish the nutrients, and disperse and germinate the seeds. We hope that *Tibet: Enduring Spirit, Exploited Land* will help to spread this message, protect the roots of indigenous cultures, and revitalize the forest of our world community.

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