

Major Issues Regarding Rangelands and Pastoralism

Poor Understanding of Rangeland Ecosystems

Local conditions on the Tibetan plateau and in Himalayan rangelands are so variable that development and conservation decisions need to be made on the basis of micro-level information. However, at present, not enough is known about this unique rangeland ecosystem to make informed decisions about altering traditional, pastoral production practices. It is essential that systematic research is conducted before interventions are proposed in the name of progress (Goldstein et al. 1990).

Inappropriate Pastoral Policies

The 'mainstream view', which maintains that traditional pastoral practices need to be improved, has largely shaped pastoral development policy throughout the world (Sandford 1983). Policies that fail to appreciate the efficacy of traditional pastoral systems are also common in the Himalayas and Tibet (Goldstein et al. 1990, McVeigh 1994, Rai and Thapa 1993). Agricultural policies in Himalayan countries have generally ignored the role of livestock in development and the potential positive contribution that livestock can make to sustainable agriculture and economic growth has largely been neglected.

Lack of Appreciation for Pastoralists' Strategies

Traditional grazing and livestock management systems, which have evolved over centuries in many cases, are often underrated by planners and development specialists. The complexity and ecological and economic efficiency of these indigenous practices are usually not sufficiently recognised. There is little doubt that poor understanding of traditional pastoral systems has contributed to the lack of suitable development programmes for these rangeland areas. The usual livestock development project that focuses on forage development, animal health, and crossbreeding falls far short of its potential impact if designed without proper appreciation of the herder's social and economic values, priorities, and incentives.

Lack of Effective Management of Biodiversity

The rangelands of the Tibetan Plateau are home to many important species of medicinal plants and wildlife. Significant gaps exist in the information about

these resources, and long-term ecological studies of important wild ungulates are lacking. Although large areas have been set aside as protected areas, there is little effective management of these reserves. In many of the protected areas there are resident pastoralists whose needs and desires have received little attention from the authorities. New approaches to conservation in Nepal, which emphasise a local people-centered model, are an encouraging step towards reconciling conservation issues, but much more work needs to be done to actually implement effective programmes.

Range development in the Himalayas and Tibet tends to centre on improving livestock production, rather than on multiple-use range resource management which provides for wildlife and the conservation of their habitat as well. Interactions between livestock and wildlife on the rangelands are still poorly understood and ways to minimise conflicts between livestock production and wildlife conservation still need to be established. This will require much greater knowledge of the needs, production potential, and constraints faced by pastoralists as well as the distribution, status, and ecology of wild ungulates, in order to develop management plans that permit the coexistence of both wildlife and livestock.