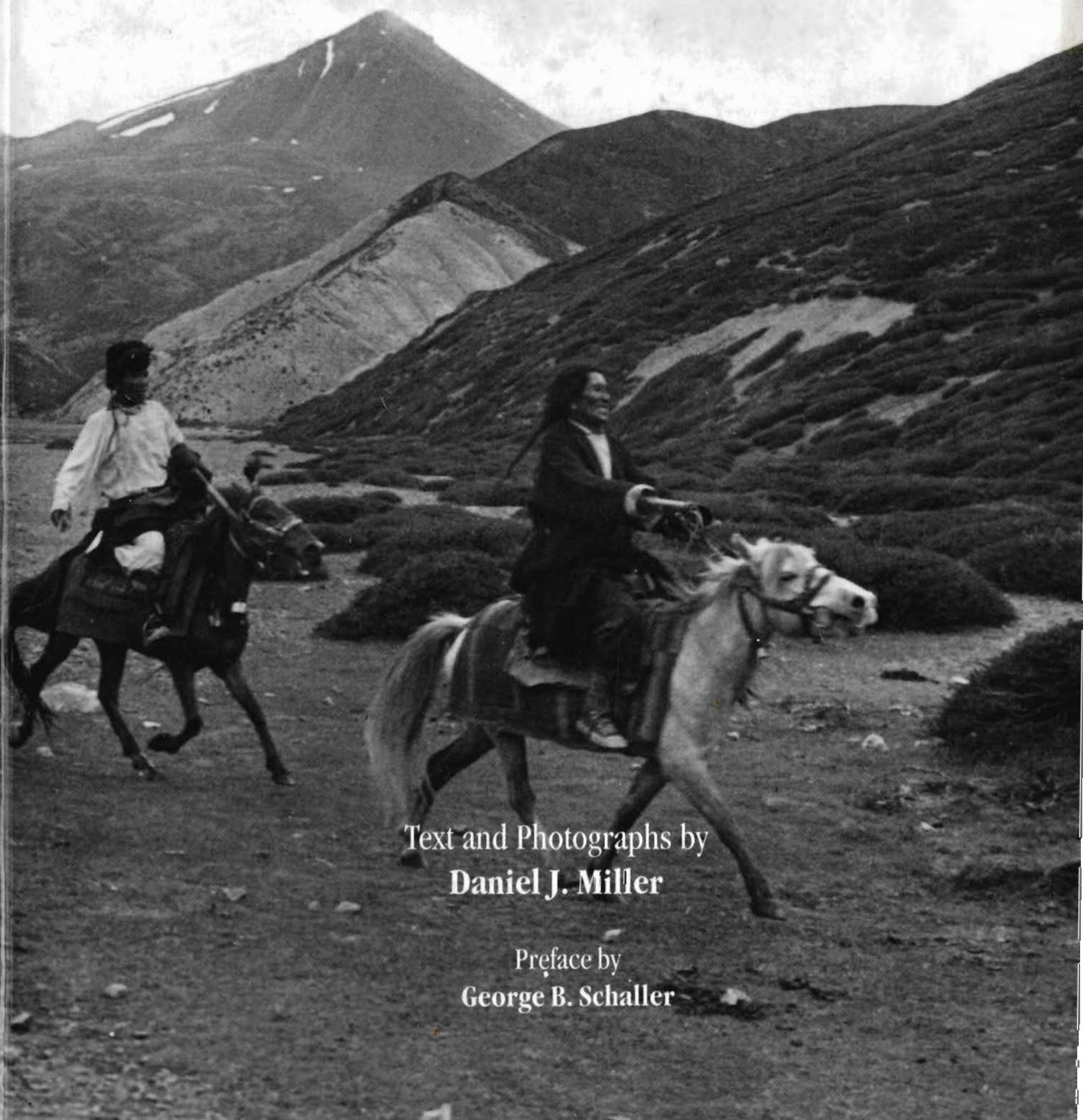


Fields of Grass

Portraits of the Pastoral Landscape and
Nomads of the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayas



Text and Photographs by
Daniel J. Miller

Preface by
George B. Schaller

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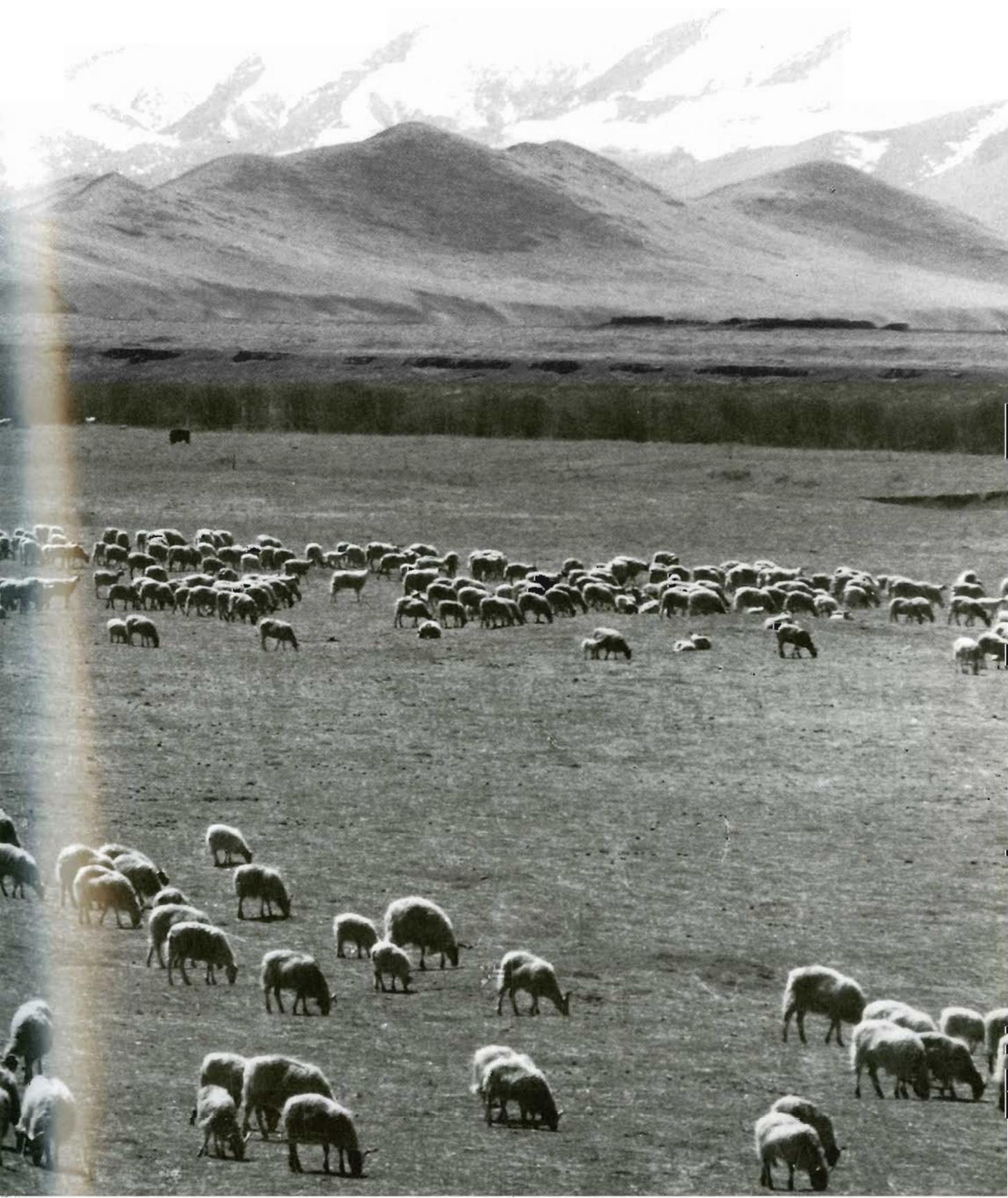


*“..... nothing can bring back the hour
of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower.”*

Wordsworth, W., 1807



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For Cynthia and Ashley

Foreword

Of the 4.3 million square kilometres that the continuing mountain range of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas and Qinghai Tibetan Plateau covers, nearly 80 per cent consists of rangelands. Rangelands include grasslands, steppes, deserts, and lush alpine meadows. Varied fauna and flora are among their important characteristics. The harsh conditions in most of these areas allowed only a low population density and enforced a nomadic lifestyle in response to climatic and altitudinal variations.

The remoteness of the high altitude rangelands and the marginal political influence of its inhabitants on national decision-making processes for some time were also reflected in the limited attention ICIMOD was able to devote to this typical mountain ecosystem. With the adoption of the First Regional Collaborative Programme for the Sustainable Development of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas in 1995, rangeland management became a fully fledged programme of the Centre, and Mr. Daniel J. Miller became ICIMOD's first rangeland management specialist. We were fortunate that Mr. Miller brought with him not only extensive knowledge and experience on the rangelands of this region, but also the skills of a highly accomplished photographer.

It is unusual for ICIMOD to publish a document that is based on photo essays; yet for the rangelands it is logical enough. First of all, few scholars and development workers have ventured into these rangelands for long, if ever. The camera's eye tells us a great deal that a topographical map or even satellite images cannot. And, secondly, this unique ecosystem warrants accelerated attention by a broader constituency/ audience – one not having a primary interest in the more technical documents that ICIMOD and Mr. Miller have also produced.

Mr. Miller worked hard to produce this special edition as a testimony to the riches of the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayan rangelands. Each photograph tells a story in itself and, in addition, is the narration of the author. In his own introduction, he has comprehensively noted his initiation, progress, and experiences into work on the rangelands and has given a generous list of acknowledgements.

We are very grateful to Daniel Miller for all the extra work he put into the preparation of this book, even after he left ICIMOD in late 1997. His successor, Ms. Camille Richard and all of us at ICIMOD no longer have a problem in explaining the importance and beauty of this important part of ICIMOD's 'territory'.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank George Schaller on behalf of ICIMOD for contributing a special preface for this edition. It is a fitting indication of the calibre of the work undertaken.

Egbert Pelinck
Director General

Author's Preface

In the fall of 1974, I first went to Nepal and trekked into the Himalayas. For four years I travelled throughout the mountains of northern Nepal, living and working with yak herders. I spoke Nepali and, after a couple of years, Tibetan. I was able to talk to nomads in their own languages about yaks and grasses and the challenges they faced in herding animals for a living in some of the world's highest elevation rangelands. Having grown up on a dairy farm in southern Minnesota in the United States, I found yak herding a fascinating way of life and the pastures the yaks grazed in a remarkable landscape. Compared to Guernsey cows in a field of clover, yaks running down a glacial moraine with their tails waving in the air exhibited a grandeur that matched the mountains in which they were found. I also found Tibetan-speaking herders an engaging group of people and believed that since they had been herding yaks across this landscape for centuries, and were still doing it, there must be many things about their lives worth learning. I started investigating Himalayan rangelands and pastoral production systems. I also began to take photos of the nomads, the animals they herded, and the land in which they lived.

At that time, Tibet was closed to foreigners, but throughout much of northern Nepal, the landscape and the pastoral production systems had close affinities with Tibet. Many of the herders spoke Tibetan and in some areas, such as Dolpo in northwest Nepal, the culture probably exhibited more traits of typical Tibetan culture than it did in neighbouring Tibet at the time. In my journeys, I sometimes travelled with yak caravans going to Tibet to trade, although I had to stop before crossing the border. From mountain passes in Nepal I could see across the ridges to the vast Tibetan plains fading into a blue horizon, and my desire to learn more about those Tibetan grazing lands was whetted. After four years in Nepal I returned to the United States committed to preparing myself for further investigations of Himalayan and Tibetan rangelands, animals, and Tibetan nomads. I went to Montana and worked as a cowboy and pursued graduate studies in range ecology at the University of Montana.

With skills acquired to handle horses and cattle, training in range management, and with an attraction for open spaces and a pastoral way of life, I returned to the Himalayas in 1983 to work on range-livestock development and wildlife conservation programmes. In Nepal and Bhutan, I quickly saw that the traditional pastoral way of life was changing. In some cases, since I was involved in development activities, I was even an instrument of the changes to which herders were trying to adapt. Documenting in photographs the daily lives of the herders I worked with became a way to portray, to others unable to visit the remote pastoral areas, the nomadic way of life and the transformations nomad society was going through. Photographs also provided a valuable record of the landscape and the uses it had been subjected to by people and their livestock.

In 1988, I had the opportunity to actually see Tibetan grazing lands for the first time. I travelled to the Tibetan area known as Amdo, in the present day Qinghai Province of China. These rangelands, in the northeastern part of the Tibetan Plateau, have always been considered some of the best grazing lands in Central Asia. It did not take long for me to develop an appreciation for them too. Since then, I have spent many months of every year working in either the Himalayas or Tibetan Plateau. My journeys have taken me from the cold deserts of the Kunlun Mountains on the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau to the subtropical savannas of the southern Himalayas, and from the lush Songpan grasslands in northwestern Sichuan Province of China in the east to the dry steppes of western Tibet. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to travel to, and work in, such a vast region. A number of the areas I travelled in are still closed to tourists and require special permits. My aim in these

journeys was to develop a better understanding of the ecology of the rangelands and the dynamics of the pastoral production systems. I was also often trying to design development programmes that would improve livestock productivity and the livelihoods of the people dependent upon livestock while, at the same time, maintaining the productivity of the rangelands and conserving wildlife.

In reviewing the photographs I had taken over the last twenty years, I realised that I had amassed a large collection of images of rangelands, nomads, and the pastoral way of life in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan Plateau. I had opportunities to visit pastoral areas that few people had been able to and acquired considerable information about these unique grazing lands. I thought it would be worthwhile to try to organize my photos into a book in order to portray the Tibetan pastoral landscape and nomadic society to others. Since so little is known about these pastoral areas, I also wanted to share some of the data and insights I had also assembled. The purpose of this book is to present images and information about the rangelands and nomads of the Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau. Improved understanding of the complex dynamics of this pastoral ecosystem should help us to make better decisions in the future about how these grazing lands should be developed and managed.

The photographs presented here span a period of twenty-two years from 1975 to 1997. Some of the very first photographs I ever took are portrayed here. Cameras and photographs are a tool I use to understand the ecology of the rangelands, the same way I use binoculars or spotting scopes to have a better view of the landscape. Many of these photographs provide a valuable record for assessing vegetation changes on the rangelands over time. Some of them already date back far enough to be useful for repeat photography now and others should prove useful in the future.

This publication would not have been possible without the support of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). I express my sincere appreciation to Egbert Pelinck, Director General of ICIMOD, for encouraging me to take on this work. Greta Rana, Senior Editor, ICIMOD, deserves special thanks for her work on this document. Thanks are owed to Sushil Joshi for the excellent layout and to Asha Kaji Thaku for preparing the maps. I also would like to express my thanks to all the herders throughout the Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau who took me into their tents and homes and shared with me their unique lifestyle. Finally, I must express my sincere love and appreciation to my wife, Ai-Chin Wee, for enabling me to take off for long periods of time to pursue my work in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan Plateau. During my absences, she raised our daughters and maintained a home for the family.

Daniel J. Miller
Beijing

Preface

Most people think of the Himalayan region, if they think of it at all, in terms of a desolate panorama of glacier-covered peaks upon which mountain climbers struggle towards an elusive summit. Often overlooked is the fact that these mountains also harbour a splendid variety of plants and animals, many of them unique to these uplands. I have spent three decades studying wildlife along the sweep of ranges from the Karakoram in Pakistan east to the Himalayas of Nepal and north across the Tibetan Plateau where sombre plains and rumped hills stretch to the horizon. There I have marvelled at slopes of rhododendrons in red flower, snow leopards gliding among crags, herds of Tibetan antelopes migrating across the steppes at 5000 m, and massive wild yak bulls standing like black totems on ridge tops.

The mountains are also home to several million people. Human existence seems insignificant in relation to the vast terrain – a cluster of huts, a nomad tent – yet its impact upon the landscape is pervasive. Forests have been cut for timber and razed for firewood, stony fields extend upwards to 4,300 m, and pastoralists penetrate the most remote valleys in search of grazing for their livestock. Degradation of habitat has exposed the soil to wind and rain, causing erosion as well as flooding in the lowlands. The hunting of wildlife for subsistence and sale is so intensive that large mammals have almost everywhere been decimated and some species are endangered. The remnants have retreated into the most inhospitable terrain.

I had come to the mountains to study large mammals, everything from markhor and blue sheep to wolf and brown bear. But it soon became clear to me that any knowledge gained through research would also have to benefit the conservation of the species. To understand nature is not enough; any biologist also has the moral obligation to help protect what he or she studies. I realised too that large samples of the mountain ecosystems, each with its unique assemblage of plants and animals, needed to be protected in national parks and reserves. Fortunately all countries in the Himalayan region have now established a network of reserves that, if properly protected and managed, will preserve fragments of their natural heritage.

However, humans are part of the mountains and will continue to be, even within reserves. Almost everywhere they live beyond their means, ecologically speaking. The goal of conservation must be to find a balance between the needs of people and their livestock and the environment with all its biological diversity. The difficult challenge is to integrate conservation with the social, spiritual, and economic values of the local people. The whole land-use pattern must be examined before innovative programmes of forest, rangeland, and wildlife management can be developed; programmes that suit the communities and are continually adapted as circumstances change. The task is immense and daunting, for it means finding viable alternatives for scarce resources and better economic ways of using them. Instead of being able to focus on an intriguing research problem, a biologist becomes a politician, fundraiser, social anthropologist, livestock specialist, and takes on many other roles to promote and implement conservation.

In recent years, I have confronted this problem on a large scale in the Chang Tang, a vast, treeless upland, most of it above 4,500m in elevation in the northwest part of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. It is one of the last great rangelands in the world, one that has not yet been degraded. But each year there is greater emphasis on development – more roads, more livestock production, more fences that impede the movements of the Tibetan wild ass and other wildlife across the open range. Yet nomads, livestock, and wildlife need to live there in the ecological harmony that is the basis of Tibetan Buddhism.

Daniel Miller has accompanied me on two of my dozen journeys to the Chang Tang to evaluate the conditions of the rangelands. His concerns were similar to mine: how can the cultural traditions of the nomads and the magnificent wild herds be preserved for the future? In *Fields of Grass* he has extended this concern to the whole pastoral area of the Himalayan region. With evocative photographs and insightful text he draws attention to a little known and neglected part of the world. The uplands are changing rapidly as global economic forces intrude into even the most isolated hut or tent. A Sanskrit proverb states that “ *a hundred divine epochs would not suffice to describe all the marvels of the Himalaya.*” At the very least we must preserve these marvels for future generations.

George B. Schaller
Wildlife Conservation Society
New York

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