

Misconceptions and Realities Regarding Pastoralism

Popular misconceptions about the sustainability of pastoralism on the Tibetan Plateau include ideas that: livestock are the cause of environmental degradation; degraded ranges could be improved if stocked at carrying capacity; large and unproductive herds are uneconomic and people can be persuaded to reduce herd size; grazing areas can be turned to more productive uses; and that new institutions and organisations need to be put in place to improve range resource management. These misconceptions help explain why rangelands and pastoral societies have largely been left out of the development agenda.

The realities are that it is not livestock but the management systems that should be blamed for environmental degradation. Secondly, it is now becoming increasingly apparent that existing paradigms for explaining the dynamics of rangeland ecosystems have not captured the dynamic nature of rangelands and, therefore, traditional measures for carrying capacity and range conditions have not been effective gauges for management in pastoral systems. Thirdly, even if seemingly uneconomical, herders oftentimes will not give up their large numbers of animals which provide manure, insurance against losses, social status, and competitive advantage in exerting control over grazing resources.

Fourthly, much of the land being used for grazing is marginal and unsuitable for cultivation, and ruminant livestock are the most efficient land use means to convert plants into protein. Finally, pastoral societies have usually developed sophisticated ways of managing shared resources which outsiders often do not understand or acknowledge.