

Conclusion

The fact that prosperous pastoral cultures and wildlife remain to this day on the rangelands of the Tibetan Plateau bears witness to the remarkable diversity and resilience of the highly unique ecosystem, as well as the sustainability of its resources if widely used. These rangelands are coming under increasing pressure from an expanding human population but, if properly managed, they should sustain watersheds, supply much of the projected increased demand for livestock products, and provide critical habitat for wildlife, including many endangered species. New perspectives regarding the assessment of range ecosystems, pastoral production practices, and conservation development provide a valuable framework for studying Himalayan and Tibetan rangeland ecosystems and suggest fresh approaches for designing pastoral development in ways that complement environmental conservation efforts. Pastoral development programmes will need to take into account local resource possibilities and constraints and the sensitivities of pastoralists. Development programmes should be flexible enough to take into account new information as it emerges and to support activities based on technologically and socially

accepted options. Only thus will the long-term viability of the Tibetan Plateau rangelands be protected and enhanced.

The remarkable steppes of the Tibetan Plateau will experience a great and tragic emptiness if the productivity of the rangelands diminishes. Unique pastoral cultures will be forced to transform beyond recognition, while wildlife populations will be severely threatened. These consequences can be avoided if timely action is taken to acknowledge the efficacy of pastoral strategies, to evaluate the rangeland resources, and to realistically appraise development alternatives for the Tibetan Plateau. These actions are crucial in order ensure economic development and environmental protection in the face of growing threats from modernisation. Such action requires a concerted effort on the part of range ecologists, livestock specialists, wildlife biologists, sociologists, economists, and development planners to devise programmes sensitive to the range resources and the needs of the local pastoralists. Sensitive ecosystems demand sensitive approaches.