

# Exploring the third pole



*Welcome to [thethirdpole.net](http://thethirdpole.net) reader*

## **PART 5: CONSERVATION AND COMMUNITIES**



# Exploring the third pole

## Editor's note

### ***Welcome to thethirdpole.net reader***

Since its launch in 2009, thethirdpole.net has provided a unique platform for information, reporting and discussion on the ecology, environment and climate of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas, the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the rivers that originate there. We aim to facilitate the free flow of accurate information and analysis and thereby support well informed policymaking in this region. Good governance is crucial to protecting ecosystems on which around 1.3 billion people depend directly or indirectly for their food, water and other vital services.

Using thethirdpole.net's unique reach across the region, we have been able to publish articles by journalists and experts from the various countries that share the benefits and risks of the world's highest mountain range and plateau, from Tibet to Bangladesh. Recognising the continued and pressing need for a regional perspective in a part of the world where access to accurate information is problematic, we are launching the first of a series of thethirdpole.net readers. These special publications will offer invaluable background material to policymakers, academics and other stakeholders.

Important articles are classified by theme and this reader is free to download. We hope that you find it useful and we encourage you to circulate the link. Please also help us to improve and develop this resource by sending your comments and feedback to [joydeep.gupta@thethirdpole.net](mailto:joydeep.gupta@thethirdpole.net) or [beth.walker@thethirdpole.net](mailto:beth.walker@thethirdpole.net).

***Isabel Hilton and thethirdpole.net editorial team***

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# Part 5:

# Conservation and communities

The third pole is one of the world's most biologically and culturally diverse regions. The land covers ecological zones from arctic tundra to tropical jungles, the deepest canyons and the highest peaks. It is home to thousands of varieties of plants, rare medicinal herbs and many endangered species, such as the wild yak, snow leopard and the migratory Tibetan antelope. The panda is also native of the Tibetan plateau. Over 600 languages are spoken in the Himalayas, a reflection of the region's cultural diversity.

The following section tells the stories of communities and animal species struggling to adapt to increasingly erratic weather patterns and economic development. Marc Foggin shares rare photos of the endangered snow leopard as he documents a community conservation project. Athar Parvaiz reports on innovative solutions to water shortages developed by farmers in the arid reaches of north-west India. Xia Liwei talks to Tibetan herders adjusting to sedentary life on the edge of Golmud city. And Tashi Sange explores people's relationship with nature through a Chinese folk story about the Tibetan black-necked crane.

*Cover image shows black-necked cranes in southwest China by Joe Orton*

# Conservation and communities

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## Tibet's snow leopards

*Local herders are central to protecting the snow leopard in the source area of the Yangtze River.*

*J Marc Foggin introduces a series of photos documenting the community conservation project.*

In a remote area of Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in China's western Qinghai province, local Tibetan herders have been actively protecting the snow leopard and other endangered wildlife in the high grasslands and mountains for more than a decade. Now, with help from non-profit organisation, Plateau Perspectives, and the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve, they are also using "camera traps" to photograph the animals and better document their distribution, range and behaviour. The images presented here include some of the first photographs taken.

There are fewer than 7,500 snow leopards worldwide, according to the latest estimates from a dozen countries. Around 60% of this elusive species' potential habitat is in China, most of it on the Tibetan Plateau. Conservation efforts are crucial and the people of Muqu village are supporting them in several ways, serving as park wardens, environmental advocates and as partners in applied wildlife research.

Such commitment to environmental protection is rooted in the community's involvement in a more people-centred approach to environmental management, known as "community co-management". When locals are treated as genuine partners and allowed to voice their concerns as well as sharing their knowledge, there is a real opportunity to find better models for a sustainable future.

In remote mountain areas of the world, if we are to succeed in protecting the snow leopard, for example, we must equally protect its fragile habitat. To protect



the snow leopard is to protect the entire landscape and many other species and habitats will in this way be preserved as well.

For over a decade, around a dozen members of Muqu village have served as wildlife monitors and searched for snow leopards in their rugged mountain terrain. Many different signs can be seen – prints, scrapes, scat and kills – and several times a year, these herders report all their sightings as well as any instance of livestock predation or poaching. Now, with the advent of technologies such as global positioning systems (GPS) and digital cameras activated by motion sensors, an increasingly clear picture of the conservation situation is emerging.

Since 2009, over a dozen camera traps have been set in the mountains of western Yushu, located according to the extensive knowledge of local herders. Nine individual snow leopards have already been captured on film, within an area of about 150-square kilometres. Clearly this geographic area has one of the highest densities of snow leopard in the world. Many other species also live here, including blue sheep, Tibetan antelope, wild ass, wild yak, black-necked crane and saker falcon.

But when snow leopards and wolves flourish, the number of livestock killed by these predators rises – and herders are starting to ask about financial compensation. On the one hand, people want to protect the land and wildlife, but on the other hand, the cost is sometimes deemed too high. Developing alternate sources of income for local herders is

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crucial, and the solution currently being explored is ecotourism.

While there are many challenges to developing an economically viable and equitable ecotourism project, the potential benefits have swayed many people in the area to give it their best effort, including tourism bureaus and several responsible business partners, community representatives and non-profit organisations. If projects in the Yushu area are well designed from an early stage, then community-based tourism could flourish, bringing benefits to local people. The environment could also be better preserved and more easily appreciated by the nation as a whole.

The benefits of working in genuine partnerships with local communities in the source area of the Yangtze River are already clear. Together we can find viable solutions to protect the high mountains, the grasslands and the wildlife of the Tibetan Plateau. And both the elusive snow leopard and local herders will enjoy the results.

*J Marc Foggin has worked in China for around 15 years, focusing his attention on conservation and community development on the Tibetan plateau. He is founding director of international NGO Plateau Perspectives and associate professor in the School of Geography and Life Sciences at Qinghai Normal University. He lives in Qinghai*

*Images by J Marc Foggin*

## TIBET'S SNOW LEOPARDS



**A tributary of the Yangtze River meanders through the grassland,** past the small township of Suojia in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province. Suojia Township encompasses a significant portion of the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, known locally as the Zhiqiu River. The vast alpine grassland and wetland ecosystems have long been used in sustainable ways by local communities, and are now part of the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve.





The main livelihood of Tibetan people in the high altitude grasslands of the Tibetan plateau is animal husbandry, mostly yak and sheep. These animals are well adapted to the harsh environmental conditions. Yak can be used to provide for many basic needs: milk is converted into different food products and yak hair used to weave “black tents”, while the animals are also used for transportation and meat.



Sheep also form a significant part of local pastoral livelihoods. Herding is done by both men and women, while most of the home-based work, such as milking, has traditionally been done primarily by women.



One of the first wildlife monitoring teams formed in 2001 to carry out a survey in “snow leopard valley”. Members of a local grassroots organisation and a branch of the local monastery participated in this early conservation work together with Plateau Perspectives. They observed many signs of snow leopards, including prints, scrapes, scat and traces of recent kills.





The Muqu village school was established in 1999, supported by the local Upper Yangtze Organization and Plateau Perspectives. In the background, the rugged mountains provide excellent snow leopard habitat. Many blue sheep can be seen in the area, and one leopard has been photographed less than one kilometre from the school.



The first joint planning meeting with nature reserve staff and local herders occurred in Suojia in 2007, inaugurating a new collaboration based on the key principles of “community co-management”.



An automatic camera trap, activated by a motion sensor, is placed in a gully behind the home of a community leader, in a mountain range known to have many snow leopards. Set up in December 2009, this and other camera traps in the same range took their first photographs less than three days later. Information from such photographs can help to identify individual snow leopards, and better understand their distribution, range and behaviour.



*The snow leopard was selected by local community members and nature reserve staff as the first focal point around which to trial the community approach to wildlife conservation. This photo was taken on 20 April, 2010 in the Tseren mountains.*



*Focusing conservation efforts on the charismatic snow leopard will bring broader benefits. If the snow leopard is conserved, then many other species in the same habitat are also likely to be protected. Meanwhile, the presence of such an elusive animal will draw visitors, helping to develop the fledgling “community ecotourism” industry as an income stream for local people. This photo was taken on 8 January, 2010 in the Tseren mountains.*



*Cultural events, such as this local festival, can help to promote community discussion and cohesion. At this festival, meetings were held that led to the formation of a wildlife monitoring team to focus on Tibetan wild ass.*



*Tibetan wild ass, or kiang, are common in many parts of the Tibetan plateau, yet little is known about their specific movements. Herders say kiang compete with domestic animals over forage, but more research is needed in order to make appropriate management plans.*





*A neighbouring Tibetan herding community focuses on monitoring and protecting the local wild yak population. Several other community-based conservation and development projects are now being developed in the region, largely under the auspices of the Forest Bureau. These should be supported and further studied to determine what makes these initiatives a success.*



*Many development and conservation policies now affect the region, including the development of winter homes in grassland areas and resettlement schemes. Collaborative management approaches may prove to be amongst the most effective ways of reconciling environmental and development goals. Support is strong, even in local government bureaus, for finding ways to promote eco-friendly approaches to rural development.*



*Some local government bureaus also support fencing in grassland areas, which may effect wildlife movements and hence impact the biodiversity conservation goals of protected areas. It is important for such programmes to be examined from an interdisciplinary perspective.*





*The Kham Tibetan people of Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture have a rich culture and history and a strong pastoralist tradition. Involving locals in the management of natural resources may be an effective way to bring sustainable development to the region and protect the fragile ecology – and ecological functions – of the Tibetan plateau.*

## Fragile adaptation in Ladakh

*Destructive floods have led farmers to question their ability to survive in the arid reaches of the Himalayas. Athar Parvaiz reports from north-west India.*



The devastating flood that struck the normally arid desert of Ladakh, north-west India, in August has multiplied the worries of local farmers, already struggling with water shortages and harsh climatic conditions. Flashfloods and mudslides killed 233 people and damaged 14.2 square kilometres of agricultural land.

Tucked high up in the western Himalayas, Ladakh is a sparsely populated, rugged desert where people struggle to turn barren and parched soil into cultivable land. The soil of Ladakh is not fertile and absorbs little water. Average rainfall is only 50 to 70 millimetres a year. In these adverse conditions, farming is an unenviable task, but diligent farmers, with support from NGOs, have created an irrigation network covering 50 square kilometres of agricultural land in Ladakh. This allows them to live off the land, against the odds.

But nothing prepared farmers for August's weather events. Unprecedented cloudbursts triggered flash floods, which in turn deposited thick layers of debris on the agricultural land and destroyed over 70% of the irrigation network built up by the farmers over years of hard work. "Crops can only be cultivated on this land after the flood debris is cleared and the top soil is exposed," said Lobzang Tsultim, director of local NGO Leh Nutrition Project. "Obviously, the farmers can't clear this debris manually, they need JCB machines, which the government and NGOs need to provide to them."

“ The government and NGOs are making no effort to restore the damaged land – the main source of survival for the farmers – to its original state. ”

According to Tsultim, the government and non-profit groups are making no effort to restore the damaged land, on which the farmers' livelihoods depend, to its original state. Apart from tourism, farming is the main occupation of people in Leh district. An average farmer makes up to US\$1000 (6,680 yuan) every year by selling crops like barley, potatoes, wheat and other products to the Indian army.

The recent floods have intensified local people's fears about the shifting climate. They are unable to decipher or explain the erratic weather patterns, but have no doubts that conditions are changing.

"Glaciers are receding rapidly and the winters are getting shorter and warmer. The snowfall which we do get, melts quickly," said Tashi Namgyal, a farmer. He added that the popular "Chadar Trek", a crossing local Tibetans have made for generations during winter, when the Zaskar River surface – part of the Indus watershed – freezes solid, is now possible only for two months. It was previously possible from December to March. "We are now seeing pests in upper villages that used to be found only in villages lying lower," he added, pointing out other signs of changing conditions. "We are also witnessing shifts in sowing and harvesting of barley."

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Tsultim agrees with this assessment: “Whether you call it man-made climate change or attribute it to other natural process, we are experiencing a lot of changes around us. Our region is arid and we have small glaciers which we draw water from. But over the last several years, many of these glaciers have receded. Not only this, we have seen some of our limited pasture lands drying up because of water scarcity.”

The farmers worry they may have to migrate away from their native land if the glaciers – their source of water – continue to diminish. “Farming is the only art we know. If there is no water left, there would be no agriculture, meaning we might have to leave this land one day in search of water,” said another farmer, Sonam Tundup.

But Tsultim believes there are other choices. The Leh Nutrition Project has worked with Chewang Norphel, a civil engineer known as the “Iceman”, who has pioneered innovative adaptive solutions to water shortages, including artificial glaciers – created by diverting a water course, lowering its velocity and volume and getting it to accumulate in the shadow of a hill. [See chinadialogue article “The iceman of Ladakh” for more on Norphel’s work.] These artificial “glaciers” provide water to irrigate farmland in the early cultivation season, when there is not enough water available from natural glaciers.

Norphel’s determination to help farmers adapt to climatic changes has not stopped here. He is now building a reservoir near a huge wasteland, which will transform the area into cultivable land for the farmers of Chamdaydo village. The 74-year-old has already created almost 40 reservoirs in as many villages, enabling farmers to turn wastelands into fertile farming territory. Tsultim asserts that adapting to the changing climate is the best option. “You have to either adapt or become extinct.” This is the message he wants to give farmers.

*Athar Parvaiz is an environmental journalist based in Kashmir.*

*Image by Athar Parvaiz*

## “There’s no doubt it’s getting warmer”

*Receding glaciers increase the risks to already perilous lives and livelihoods high in the Himalayas. Joydeep Gupta reports from the mountains of north-west India.*



The annual monsoon that is the lifeline of south Asia stops at the 5,000-metre slopes of the Pir Panjal range in the Himalayas. The Tibetan plateau effectively starts on the northern slopes of the Lahaul and Spiti valleys in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Little glaciers roll down both the northern and southern slopes, later turning into streams that feed the mighty Indus River system that straddles India and Pakistan.

The trouble is that the glaciers are getting smaller – and so are the streams. “Do you see that glacier coming down the saddle between those two peaks?” asked local farmer Vikas Sharma in late September. “We call it sona pani [gold water], because that is the water that irrigates the farms in my village, Kumpi, which you can see near the bottom of the valley.”

“Until 10 years ago, that glacier used to come right down to the bottom of the slope. For at least nine months of the year, it used to start melting only when it reached the outskirts of our village,” said Sharma. “But then it started to melt higher and higher up the slope, and there was less water too. Now it is September – just after the monsoon, when it should have the maximum ice – but it’s only halfway down the slope. I don’t know how we are going to irrigate our crops next summer.”

His village is not the only one where people risk losing their crops due to shortage of water. Sona pani is part of the complex of glaciers at the Rohtang pass that feed two major rivers: the Beas River, which flows through the Kullu Valley, and the Chenab River, which

flows through the Lahaul valley. Once out of the Himalayas and in the great plains of south Asia, these rivers flow into the Indus River and form vital parts of the system that provides water to Punjab (literally, the “land of the five rivers”) in India and Pakistan. Less snow here means less water in the rivers that irrigate the main food grain producing areas in both countries.

The Hindu Kush Himalayas – sometimes called the water tower of Asia – provide water to 10 major river basins in China, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Afghanistan and a number of countries in central Asia. An estimated 1.3 billion people depend on the waters from these glaciers. They are at increasing risk due to climate change, which has caused the glaciers to recede.

“ *When we came here in May, after a gap of many months, we found the frozen body of a man inside the shed. He was a local bureaucrat, who must have got stuck in a blizzard while trying to cross the pass.* ”

I stood in a meadow next to the almost-4,000-metre-high Rohtang Pass, which connects the northern areas of Himachal Pradesh and the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir to the rest of India. The rugged road, much loved by trekkers and motorsports enthusiasts due to its breathtaking views, used to be closed by the snows from November to May each year.



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Officially, it still closes throughout this period. “But now we never know when it will snow and when it will not”, said Sukh Ram, one of the men employed by the Indian Army’s Border Roads Organisation to keep the pass clear. “Last winter, it didn’t really snow till February, though we kept the pass closed as per orders. But now it suddenly started snowing a couple of weeks back [in early September]. We had to close the pass for three days, and so many people were stranded on the northern side.”

In the meadow there was snow on the ground, which began to melt as the sunshine gathered strength and fell on the walls of a broken-down shed. “We shelter in that shed when there’s a blizzard,” said Ram. “This is a dangerous place. It gets very windy every afternoon – and you never know when a blizzard will strike. When we came here in May, after a gap of many months, we found the frozen body of a man inside the shed. He was a local bureaucrat, who must have got stuck in a blizzard while trying to cross the pass.”

These dangers have always been part and parcel of life in the Himalayas. But life is getting more perilous, and in new ways. As the glaciers start to melt faster due to global warming, in many cases the waters accumulate just below the glacier, as the little stream that issues from the glacier’s snout becomes unable to carry the extra water. These glacial lakes threaten to burst their banks as the water accumulates. Such glacial lake outburst floods – GLOFs, as they are called – have occurred a number of times in Nepal and Bhutan over the past 50 years, though there is no record of them before. Every time it means loss of life and property downstream. Scientists at the Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) say there are at least 36 GLOF threats right now in Nepal alone.

These are the immediate threats as the glaciers recede. In the longer term, the risk is that ice accumulation in these glaciers will occur at a rate slower than the melt, leading to the disappearance of at least the smaller glaciers from the Himalayan

region. There are an estimated 9,000 to 12,000 of these small glaciers in the Indian Himalayas alone. Their disappearance, in turn, means rivers that now run throughout the year will become seasonal. The glaciers may contribute only about 10% of the total water flow in large river basins like the Ganges, but this is vital for perennial water flow and for water supply downstream in the dry months, when it is most needed.

Scientists say they do not know enough about what is happening to the Himalayas, especially the Himalayan glaciers, as a result of climate change. The last assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, published in 2007, described the area as data-deficient. Indian and Chinese scientists are now starting a large number of research projects to study the effects, including some joint projects. Meanwhile, the few weather stations that have been set up show that the rate of warming in the Himalayas is six times higher than the global average, says professor Syed Iqbal Hasnain, a leading glaciologist at the New Delhi-based The Energy and Resources Institute. India has just started a major research programme to study the Himalayan ecosystem, especially the way it is being affected by climate change. But many worried policy-makers say the time to act is now: they cannot afford to wait for the results of systematic scientific studies, which may take years. As Rajesh Kumar, a glaciologist with the Birla Institute of Technology Extension Centre in Jaipur, points out, even calculating the extent to which the temperature has gone up will take years, since there were few weather stations in the Himalayas in the past.

Farmer Vikas Sharma had little doubt about the need to act now. “I don’t know to what extent it’s getting warmer,” he said. “We don’t have the sophisticated instruments to measure that exactly. But there’s no doubt it’s getting warmer and winters are getting shorter. We’ll soon have to start growing other varieties of maize that don’t need so much water. We know those varieties are not so good and we

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won't get the same price in the market. But what's the option?"

*Joydeep Gupta is project director (south Asia) of the third pole project.*

*Image by Simply Czar*

## “Who are these people now?”

*Tibetan herders are struggling to adjust to sedentary life on the edge of the city of Golmud. Xia Liwei visited one family and listened to their story.*

Fifty-eight-year-old Sonka never dreamed he might one day leave his ancestral village of Cuochi, on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau, and move to the outskirts of Golmud, a largely Han Chinese city in northwest Qinghai province. Much less did he imagine his family's entire way of life would change.

An unaffected smile brightened Sonka's dark face as he welcomed me warmly into his home. His wife and daughter served tea and snacks, while Ouyao, a member of the staff at local NGO, Snowland Great Rivers Environmental Protection Association, translated Sonka's explanation of how he came to live in Golmud.

In 2005, this family of five, together with almost 300 other herding households from Sanjiangyuan – Qinghai's “Three Rivers Source” area, which contains the headwaters of the Yangtze, Mekong and Yellow River – were relocated to a settlement eight kilometres south of Golmud. The move was part of the government's “ecological migration” scheme, designed to protect the region's delicate environment.

Sonka agreed to move after local government officials told him that herders pose a “threat to the grasslands”, along with the plateau pika, a small mammal considered a pest for competing with other species for food and degrading the land. If moving would be good for the grassland, Sonka said, he was willing to do so. He arranged for someone else to look after the family's several head of cattle – this would provide some extra money for the family, and



also give him a way to return to the village, should he wish to, a decade down the line.

“So, have the grasslands improved since then?” I asked.

“Yes. I go back several times a year, and the grass is looking better and better,” Sonka replied.

For Sonka, another advantage of the move is that his children can go to school more easily. In Cuochi, the elementary school only went up to third grade, and both facilities and teaching were poor. Now the children can go to the elementary school over the road and, later, to middle school in Golmud – no matter what other challenges they face, education here is better than in Cuochi.

“ *In Cuochi, the family had meat and milk from their own cattle, used dung for fuel and wore homemade sheepskin clothing. They rarely needed cash.* ”

That doesn't mean everything is perfect, however. In fact, the family has plenty of complaints about the local schooling. They have various fees to pay, adding up to 300 yuan to 400 yuan (US\$48 to \$63) over the year, and Sonka thinks the teachers are too casual about their lessons: one took three weeks sick leave and there was no supply teacher to fill in. His youngest son used to attend the school, but there were so many holidays and so few classes that they worried he wasn't learning anything. Instead, they

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sent him to a Buddhist orphan school, much further away from home.

Sonka's daughter, Wurong Zhuoma, was in fourth grade when she moved schools. She whispered to us that, after a year in the new place, her legs and arms were covered with marks where the teacher had hit her. She said she was too scared to tell her parents in case the teacher found out and hit her more. Not one student in the class had escaped the teacher's blows, she said.

But Sonka's biggest worry is that the family is spending more money than it brings in.

The government pays each relocated family an annual subsidy of 8,000 yuan (US\$1,266). When they first moved, Sonka thought such a large sum would be enough to feed and clothe all five of them. But he soon found out that, in the new village, everything costs.

In Cuochi, it was different: they had meat and milk from their own cattle, used dung for fuel and wore homemade sheepskin clothing. They rarely needed cash. The family was also used to having meat at every meal, but they can't afford to buy it at the market in the new place. Sonka keeps in touch with relatives back in Cuochi, and asks them to bring beef or mutton when they visit. And when he goes to Cuochi, he brings back as much meat as he can carry.

Sonka is uneducated, unskilled and can't speak Mandarin. The only work available to him is basic labouring – construction work, for instance, or moving goods. It's tiring and the hours are long, and Sonka is often the oldest worker on site. But the family needs the money.

When caterpillar fungus – an ingredient used in Chinese medicine – is in season, the family goes out to pick it. Sonka's sons are fast diggers and can collect a lot. His daughter also works in a hotel. Between the fungus harvesting and the hotel work, the family makes around 8,000 yuan, but after paying a fungus-

collection fee of 1,500 yuan per head, they end up clearing only 2,000 yuan (US\$316).

The other families in the village face the same problem: a serious shortage of money. I met Kangzhuo, a nun from a Sichuan nunnery, who was visiting her sister. She said she was disgusted with conditions here: "There's no grasslands, no cows and no sheep – what have they got? Just a cramped house!"

She pointed at the wasteland surrounding the village. "Who are these people now? They're not Tibetans and they're not Han. If they were Tibetan, they would have grasslands and livestock; if they were Han, they could speak Mandarin and work. But they can't herd, and they can't work."

Standing in front of an empty house, she continued to complain: "There's a government regulation saying you can't sell these houses. But, if the herders can't survive here, what else are they meant to do? Some people have sold their houses anyway, at a very low price."

The relocation policy states that, after 10 years, the herders can decide whether to stay in their new homes or return to their villages. Most say they want to go back. They say they miss the grasslands and life in the new village is tough.

Ma Wenqing is head of the Qumalai county office in Golmud. He said many of the problems in the new village are related to the hukou, or household registration system. Because they are still registered in their home village, the herders are only entitled to free or subsidised healthcare at Qumulai County Hospital, for instance, and making the trip there and back costs 500 yuan (US\$79). Ma has encouraged the herders to shift their household registrations to Golmud, saying this would not only bring them preferential treatment, but also make it easier to implement and report on infrastructure projects.

In the nearby Yangtze River village, where residents are already registered in Golmud, the conditions



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are much better – they even have sports facilities. But Sonka explained that, because many people are reluctant to leave their native land, they are also reluctant to change their registration. “It’s like betraying your home,” he said. And so the problem has not been resolved.

After meeting Sonka, I asked myself whether the relocation policy is worth the sacrifice each member of his family – and others like his – has made. Will it bring them happier lives? Will it protect and preserve the precious Tibetan culture and its simple values? If the answer to these questions is no, then the ecological migration policy should be re-examined.

*Xia Liwei was a 2010 participant in the project Grassland Tribes.*

*Image by Fan Mingxiao*

February 10, 2012

## Love story of the black-necked crane

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*With this tale of loss, narrated through a series of drawings, [Tashi Sange](#) explores people's relationship with nature in the shifting climate of China's far western plateau.*

*Tashi Sange is a Buddhist khenpo (scholar) at Baiyu Monastery in Golog, Qinghai, and the founder and head of the Nianbaoyuze Environmental Protection Society. He has become a local legend in Qinghai for his efforts to protect – and to paint – the region's birdlife. In this series of pictures, drawn especially for chinadialogue, he shares a folk tale about one of Tibet's sacred birds, the black-necked crane.*

My home is in Golog prefecture, Qinghai, to the south of the Nianbaoyuze Mountains. There is a huge wetland there, called Narangsang. A relative of mine, Morao, lives by that wetland, and he told me this story. It happened decades ago.

*Images by Tashi Sange*

## LOVE STORY OF THE BLACK-NECKED CRANE



**In summer, the Narangsang wetland is very dangerous** and people and livestock stay away. Anyone who strays there is liable to disappear without trace – that is, until their bones surface years later. And so the wetland becomes a paradise for black-necked cranes: hundreds of them gather here every summer to breed. They used to arrive in May or later. By then, the herders had started working in the fields and had lined up piles of cattle dung to use as fertiliser.



Locals say the cranes used those piles of dung as landmarks. But now the birds arrive in March, before the herders have moved to their summer pastures. Perhaps because they have no dung to guide them, they have changed their migration route. The herders say the weather stays warm for longer and the cranes now leave in November instead of October. The shifting climate may also be why their numbers have fallen – now only 30 or 40 come to the Nianbaoyuze Mountains each year.



A traditional Tibetan wedding may see a girl married off to a family in a faraway village. Sometimes, she will never return. The cranes arrive in summer and leave in autumn, and live near the herders' homes. The herders know the routes the cranes take. The girls see the cranes flying from their own village and sing songs of home.



When they arrive, the cranes form large groups, but gradually pair off. Usually, each pair produces two eggs, but only one chick will likely survive.



Sometimes they arrive late, and so the chicks also hatch late. Winter arrives before they have grown.



The chicks can't migrate, and so their parents cover them with a pile of grass and leave them to spend the winter alone.





The strong winter winds can blow the protective grass away, leaving the chicks to freeze to death. The herders worry when they see the cranes arriving late. When winter arrives, they help out by weighing the grass down with scrub and stones. The black-necked crane is one of Tibet's three sacred birds (the others are the raven and the magpie). Children hope to grow up to be beautiful like the cranes and to travel to distant places. The herders won't hurt the birds – they believe it would bring disaster upon their family. And so the cranes here aren't scared of people.



In winter, the wetlands near the summer pastures freeze over. To keep cattle and dogs from getting into the wetlands and destroying the nests, the herders move away before the ice forms. In the past, the herders would have done anything for the birds, but these days the younger ones don't care and put their livestock first. The cranes all leave on the same day. The day before they go, they spend the night near the herders' homes. As their migration approaches, they look to the sky and call out. The herders know they are about to leave, and often come out of their homes to watch them. The herders tie their dogs up to prevent them from harming the cranes.



One year, Morao's dog wasn't tied up properly and it bit a female crane. The bird's mate rushed to protect it and together the birds scared the dog away. Their chick fled in fear.



*The next morning, the flock was ready to leave. But the injured bird and its mate couldn't go. They looked to the sky. The other cranes circled, landed and took off again. They came back several times, but eventually flew away.*



*In the afternoon, the family's chick also left.*



*The injured bird was worried about her chick and squawked at her mate to fly after it. Hesitantly, he did so – but returned several times. Finally, as night fell, he flew away, leaving his injured mate behind.*



*It snowed that evening. The herders searched for the bird, worried that a wolf or a fox would kill it. But it was nowhere to be found. They were also worried for the two that had left – would the chick find the flock? Would its father catch up with it? They prayed for their safety.*



*The next morning, Morao's daughter Naji finally found the injured crane and took it home.*



*The family immediately put it in a pot of warm milk. It was badly hurt, and covered in oil and dirt. Its once black and white feathers were greasy and grey.*





Fortunately, the family lived near a lama who knew Tibetan medicine and treated the bird's wounds. But it couldn't fly, and its oily feathers couldn't keep it warm. The herders made the crane some woollen clothes, and at night it slept in the same tent as their children.



To stop it from wondering off and being bitten again, they tied the bird up. It could only walk as far as the rope would allow it, and looked dismal in its grey jacket. And so the crane passed a long slow winter.



As the spring flowers opened, the herders moved again. They put the crane in a basket on the back of a yak and took it to the summer pastures.



One morning, the crane started to call to the sky – the first time it had made a sound since being hurt. The herders guessed that the flock was returning and they ran out to look. After a long while, the flock arrived. As it flew overhead, one of the birds dived from the sky and landed by the injured creature.



The herders recognised it as the bird's mate. The two cranes intertwined their necks and called out in unison, and then fell to the ground, silent.



The herders looked on from afar, but the birds didn't move. When they got closer, the herders found both birds had died.





*The Tibetans say that for a person, sadness lasts at most a year, but for a bird it lasts a lifetime. A person will not mourn a relative for long, but a bird's pain will stay with it until death.*