

LETTERS

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Protect vulnerable Tibet

In a recent opinion piece, Björn Conrad rightly gave China great credit for its pursuit of a low-carbon revolution ("The world's rising green power?", 26 November-2 December). There was, though, an important omission in his article - Tibet, an area frequently referred to as the earth's 'third Pole' because it contains the biggest ice fields outside the Arctic and Antarctic.

It is the biggest land-locked repository of water in the world, serving as a lifeline for much of Asia and millions of people in countries downstream. It also plays an essential role in the intricate process that creates monsoon rains across Asia. This underlines why we should all be concerned by a startling fact about which few are aware: Tibet's climate is warming twice as fast as the world's. The impact of the current melting of Tibet's glaciers is likely to be catastrophic.

Limiting the speed of this change is everyone's responsibility. Tibet's climate is a global issue.

There is, though, one change that is fully within the control of the Chinese government: land use. This matters because Tibet's grasslands could serve as a carbon sink and limit global climate change.



CLIMATE CONCERN The Kharola glacier in Tibet. REUTERS

The latest scientific research shows that livestock mobility is critical to the health of the grasslands and that grazing can mitigate the negative effects of warming on the rangelands. Chinese government policies to settle nomads from the grasslands - displacing their livestock in the process - are therefore contributing to the ecological depletion of the Tibetan plateau and its capacity to capture carbon.

Because Tibet is so vulnerable to climate change and is so important as a carbon sink, we believe it is a matter of urgency that negotiators at the UN's climate-change conference in Copenhagen consider initiatives that take into account

the following three points:

Firstly, an independent, international scientific assessment of the changes in the Tibetan plateau's ecosystems, water resources and land-use policies is needed.

Secondly, Tibetans - especially Tibetan nomads - need to be integrated into the decision-making and management of the plateau's natural resources. Their inclusion is essential to understanding, mitigating and adapting to changes in the Tibetan plateau's water, forest and grassland resources.

Thirdly, there should be greater collaborative trans-boundary decision-making and governance of the Tibetan plateau's water resources.

Just as China is essential to successful implementation of global climate-change solutions, Tibet is indispensable to China's ability to implement them successfully. The co-operation of stakeholders - from Tibetan nomads to Chinese scientists and representatives of the nations downstream that depend on Tibet's water - is crucial.

Tibet needs serious attention in global talks on climate change and China's strategy to address climate change needs to include the Tibetan people.

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