

GEOGRAPHY & NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The Tibetan Plateau is one of the highest land masses in the world surrounded by some of the highest mountain ranges in the world. At an average elevation of 12-15,000 feet, Tibetans live a unique human existence. Their land is a spectacular, yet rugged natural environment, mostly above the treeline. The Tibetan environment is also home to unique vegetation and wildlife, including Yak, Blue Sheep, Snow Leopard, one of the oldest species of horse, and dogs such as the Mastiff and Lhasa Apsos. All of the major rivers of Asia have their source in Tibet. For example, the Tsangpo River in Central Tibet runs through the Himalayas and becomes the Brahmaputra in India. This makes the ecology of Tibet an important influence on the ecology of the rest of East, Southeast and South Asia.

Farming and nomadic pastoralism make up the majority of the Tibetan economy. Tibetans learned how to make the best use of limited natural resources and established sustainable land practices which worked with, not against the natural environment. The Tibetan Government, before 1959, had environmental protection policies which went far to not disturb the natural balance of their eco-system, by regulating the hunting of wildlife. This sustainable attitude stemmed from a traditional Buddhist view of compassion and non-violence for all living beings. Construction workers and farmers were required to remove all animals and insects from harm's way whenever they moved earth. A study of Tibetan geography will also reveal how much Tibetan culture and the tradition of Buddhism in Tibet were shaped by the unique natural environment of the Tibetan Plateau. Traditional land use practices and issues of sustainability can also be examined in the ethnically Tibetan regions of Bhutan, Mustang (Nepal), Dolpo (Nepal) and Ladakh (India).

The natural environment and wildlife in Tibet has been drastically exploited by Chinese economic and development policies, impacting some species, such as the Snow Leopard, to the point of extinction, and destroying natural resources, through the aggressive demands on mining and forest industries. Recent floods along the Yangtze were caused by deforestation in the mountains along the Tibet-China border. The Tibetan Plateau has also become home to a Chinese nuclear missile arsenal. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government in Exile have proposed that Tibet be made a zone of peace and a wildlife sanctuary.

Questions for Discussion and Assignment

- What makes the geography of Tibet unique to the rest of the planet?
- What physical features define the geography of Tibet?
- What are the natural resources of Tibet?
- What unique wildlife flourishes(ed) on the Tibetan Plateau and its Himalayan border?
- How does the ecology of Tibet influence the rest of Asia?
- How has the geography and natural environment of Tibet helped shape Tibetan culture?
- What are traditional Tibetan land use practices?
- How is the traditional Tibetan approach to working with the land an example of sustainability?

How has land use changed since the Chinese government took control of Tibet?

Words for Reflection

*If the valley is reached by a high pass,
Only the best friends or worst enemies are visitors.*
- Tibetan Proverb

Curricular Ideas

- ❑ Have students compare different maps of Tibet: physical, political, historical, maps made before and after 1950
- ❑ Discuss the interdependence between the ecology of Tibet and the ecology of the rest of Asia as it relates to the source of the continent's major rivers. Have students trace the route of the major rivers in Asia on a map starting from their source on the Tibetan Plateau to their mouth or end in other regions of South, East, and Southeast Asia.
- ❑ Have students examine the traditional Tibetan land use practices of nomadic pastoralists and farmers. Although traditional land use is declining in Tibet, these practices still thrive in ethnically Tibetan areas outside of Chinese occupied Tibet, such as Bhutan, Ladakh (India), and Mustang (Nepal).
- ❑ Have students study the unique wildlife of Tibet and the Himalaya, such as the Snow Leopard, Blue Sheep, Himalayan Brown Bear, Tibetan Pony, and Yak. Examine the reasons why some of these species are on the verge of extinction, such as the snow leopard.
- ❑ The contrast between the traditional Tibetan land use practices of sustainability and the Chinese Government's view of development can be studied as microcosm of current global attitudes towards the environment. Compare traditional land use with contemporary land use in Tibet, then create a cross-cultural connection to changes in land use in another country.
- ❑ Flooding problems on the Yangtze last year were caused by erosion from deforestation at the source of the river in Tibet. Examine how this environmental situation has impacted, as well as has been impacted by, the Three Gorges Dam project?

Supporting Materials

- 📖 Physical Tibet (map)
- 📖 Political Tibet (map)
- 📖 Tibet: 1959 (map)
- 📖 Geography of Tibet (fact sheet)
- 📖 Political Terms (glossary)
- 📖 Ecology of the Land and People (reading from Tibet: Enduring Spirit, Exploited Land)

- 📖 Introduction to Tibet (reading from Tibet: A Political History)
- 📖 Tibet as a Living Model (reading from Tibet: Enduring Spirit, Exploited Land)

Suggested Sources (see Sources section)

K-4:

- 📖 Tibet: Tintin's Travel Diaries
- 📖 Faces' Tibet Issue

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- 📖 Tibet (Kalman)
- 📖 Tibet (Heinrichs)
- 📖 Tibet: Enduring Spirit/Exploited Land
- 📖 Faces, Tibet Issue
- 📖 New Internationalist, Tibet Issue

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- 📖 Tibet: Enduring Spirit/Exploited Land
- 📖 Tibet Guide
- 📖 Ancient Futures

General:

- 📖 Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology
- 📖 Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue- An Interfaith Dialogue
- 📖 Tibet's Sacred Mountain: The Extraordinary Pilgrimage to Mount Kailas

National Geographic Magazine:

- 📖 Himalayan Caravans, December 1993
- 📖 Tibet's Remote Chang Tang, August 1993
- 📖 Bhutan, Kingdom in the Clouds, May 1991
- 📖 The Remote World of Tibet's Nomads, June 1989
- 📖 Himalaya, November 1988
- 📖 A Journey Through Tibet, December 1987
- 📖 Ladakh, The Last Shangri-la, March 1978

Video:

- 📖 Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh
- 📖 Mustang: The Hidden Kingdom

World Wide Web:

- 📖 Tibet Environment Watch: www.few.org