H. H. the Dalai Lama, on the Third Pole... ...and the Tibetan Environment

Ecologically speaking, the Tibetan plateau houses the source of many of Asia's greatest rivers—including Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) and Senge Khabab (Indus), which flow southward, and Dzachu (Mekong), Machu (Yellow River), and Drichu (Yangtze), which run east. The Communist Chinese occupation of Tibet has had a devastating effect on the health of these rivers, with significant environmental consequences to many countries in Asia. In the future too, unless responsible custodianship of the sources of these major rivers is ensured, there may be significant conflicts in connection with access to water, indispensable for the survival of hundreds of millions of people in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Some environmental specialists refer to the Tibetan plateau as "the Third Pole," to add to the North and South Poles, for reasons including it being the largest repository of fresh water. In addition, the ecosystem of the plateau plays a crucial role in the regulation of the monsoon across South Asia.

China's mass deforestation in the Tibetan plateau, aggressively carried out especially in the 1980s, is reported to have destroyed more than 50 percent of forests in Kham (eastern Tibet), for example. Environmentalists are deeply concerned about the long-term negative impact of such extensive deforestation in the plateau, especially in relation to temperature increase and flooding during the monsoon in the lower regions. With respect to climate change, many years ago, an environmental scientist told me that, given Tibet's high altitude and dry climate, any ecological damage done on the plateau will take much longer to recover. The same scientist also told me about how Tibet's vast northern plains, *Jangthang*, plays a crucial role in cooling the temperature through reflecting the sun's light instead of absorbing it.

One of the greatest areas of concern is the construction of mega-dams such as the one at Yamdrok Lake and the Zangmu Dam in the Lhoka region close to the border of Bhutan. Today we know from environmental science that there is a connection between earthquakes and the construction of dams in the high-altitude Tibetan plateau, given that the region is one of the most seismically active areas in the world. The Tibetan plateau is also known for its vast mineral deposits. According to China's own Geological Survey bureau, the plateau is understood to have reserves of thirty to forty million tons of copper, more than forty million tons of zinc, and billions of tons of iron, including especially large deposits of rare minerals, such as lithium and uranium.... If mining is done at all in the Tibetan plateau, it has to be conducted in accord with the highest sensitivity to environmental impact. In the end, a careless, instrumental, or mercantile approach to extraction will lead to long-term consequences, which will be experienced way beyond the boundaries of the Tibetan plateau.

Lastly, there has been a large-scale forced migration of nomads from their traditional grasslands in different parts of the Tibetan plateau. Historically, Tibet's nomadic communities have lived in the vast open plains, including the grasslands, and have developed a symbiotic relationship with their environment such that their presence on the vast open space has served as the best form of caretaking for the ecology. Displacements of these traditional nomadic communities have not only been devastating for the nomads, but also they have created a new cycle of imbalance in the environment.

I had hoped, given that ecological health is a concern common to Tibetans as well as the Chinese, that the protection of Tibet's fragile environment would be one area where one could see systematic and sustained joint efforts. If the Chinese authorities were to allow environmental scientists, including especially Chinese scientists, to work hand in hand with local Tibetans who know their environment best, there is the possibility of creating an effective approach to reducing unnecessary ecological damage on the plateau. I was told that a noted Chinese environmental scientist who had spent many years in Tibet has commented that where religious tradition is strongest, the environment is well protected, and this is something that should give us pause for thought.

Historically, with our cultural and religious practices that emphasize living in harmony with nature, Tibet's natural environment—including flora and fauna—had never suffered excessive abuse at the hands of the human inhabitants of the vast plateau. Setting aside the implications for regional and international stability, the risk of leaks or mistakes carries a devastating threat to the fragile ecology. Were the waters of the rivers to be polluted, the destructive impact on the lives of many millions dependent on these rivers cannot be calculated.

When you take all these issues together—the militarization of the Tibetan plateau, which includes the stationing of nuclear weapons; an increasing security face-off between two of Asia's largest armies across more than three thousand kilometers of border, of which some crucial parts remain disputed; and ecological destruction of the plateau through deforestation and extensive mining, as well as unpredictable management of the sources of some of Asia's greatest rivers, on which the livelihoods of hundreds of millions depend—the invasion of Tibet has been truly tragic, not just for the Tibetans but for the whole of humanity too. It is a tragedy of historic proportions whose destructive fallout will continue to reverberate through the centuries.

Had Tibet been able to remain free, these geopolitical and ecological problems would not exist. This is the plain truth.

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