

Central Afghanistan Rangelands

A History of Tribal Rule, Grazing, War, and Rebuilding

By Daniel Robinett, Daniel Miller, and Donald Bedunah

Afghanistan, encompassing 63,000,000 ha, is a little larger than the states of Arizona and New Mexico combined and has a long history of human occupation. It is a culturally diverse country peopled by tribes of Turkish, Persian, and Mongolian descent. The northern foothills of the Hindu Kush, the major mountain range of Afghanistan, are within the historic range of the domestication of wheat and barley and sheep and goats some 10,000 to 11,000 yr ago.¹ The grazing of small flocks of closely herded sheep and goats over the last 4,000–5,000 yr has been an important factor in shaping the development of Afghan plant communities. Today rangelands comprise between 60% and 75% of the land area depending on the source of the information. These rangelands are critical for supplying Afghanistan with livestock products, fuels for heating and cooking, building materials, medicinal plants, and habitat for wildlife. Rangeland watersheds feed the springs, streams, and rivers, and they are the lifeblood of the country, nourishing nearly 4,000,000 ha of irrigated lands. In this paper we provide an overview of the rangelands of Central Afghanistan and the critical issues and problems regarding natural resource use and rangeland management. To understand the current situation it is necessary to review the historic setting to appreciate how the rangelands were formed and why the current problems are so daunting. As such, we begin with a discussion of Afghanistan's history and describe the natural setting, including geology, geography, hydrology, and climate, as well as agriculture and livestock. We then discuss the Central Afghanistan rangelands of the Hindu-Kush, including aspects of rangeland inventory and range management.



Bamiyan, Central Afghanistan, farmland and rangeland in the Hindu Kush mountains.

Historic Setting

Afghanistan has a long and interesting history, and although many people have tried to conquer this rugged landscape with its independent tribes, none have been able to control the region for long. Alexander the Great invaded the area in 340 BC and even married a Bactrian princess in the city of Balkh. Genghis Khan conquered the area in 1220 AD and destroyed cities like Ghazni, Herāt, Mazār-e Sharīf, and Bāmiān. By the 1700s Afghan dynasties, dominated by the Pashtun tribes in the east, began a rule that continued until recent times. During the mid-1800s through the 1900s