

Executive Summary

Introduction

The mountains of southwest China encompass the temperate to alpine montane region found between the eastern-most edge of the Tibetan Plateau and the central Chinese plain. Some of the largest remaining blocks of contiguous forest in China are located in Western Sichuan, within this mountainous zone, while the Tibetan Plateau is characterized by extremes in topography, vegetation and climate. During the summer months, the Tibetan Plateau acts as a barrier to the monsoon and traps clouds and moisture, giving the alpine flora a lushness found nowhere else on Earth—an extraordinary 230 rhododendron species are found here, half of which are endemic to the region. The diverse vegetation provides habitat for many endangered and endemic wildlife species, including Giant panda, Red panda, Golden monkey, Snow leopard, and Takin. Based on the area's high vascular plant diversity, impressive mammalian diversity and high levels of endemism among avian species, the Mountains of Southwest China are recognized as one of 34 global Hotspots of biodiversity (Mittermeier et al. 2004).

This Biodiversity Hotspot, comprising nearly one-tenth of China's land area (about 800,000 km²), contains the eastern Tibet Autonomous Region, northwestern Yunnan, western Sichuan, the southeastern tip of Qinghai and the southern tip of Gansu—the greater Hengduan Mountains—and harbors the richest biodiversity of any temperate forest region in the world (Boufford et al. 2004).

The region is also culturally rich. Nearly 80 percent of the hotspot is inhabited by Tibetans, who are strong believers in Tibetan Buddhism, which teaches unique cultural values and perceptions toward life and the natural world. For example, in Ganzi Prefecture, western Sichuan, Tibetan villages and monasteries have designated more than 2,000 sacred natural sites, thereby providing critical refuge for wildlife by preserving and sustaining habitats. Some sacred mountains have survived the large-scale commercial logging of the last century and remain old-growth forests.

In Ganzi Prefecture of Sichuan and eastern Tibet, those places where wildlife still can be found are most often the protected sacred sites of local villages and monasteries. The practice of protecting sacred sites has resulted in an accumulated wealth of indigenous knowledge on land-use and resource management and is still functional in many places despite strong influences from outside the region. This non-material value system presents a unique opportunity for biodiversity conservation in the Mountains of Southwest China Hotspot and is especially important in promoting sustainable development and livelihoods, not only for Tibetan communities but also for the rest of Chinese society.

This cultural tradition now faces great challenges from rapid social and economic development. Building roads through remote areas has caused habitat destruction and has attracted increasing numbers of tourists who further disturb habitats and stimulate wildlife consumption. Tourists from outside the region also have had a gradual but profound influence on the Tibetan culture. Tourists help create a market for wild fishes which Tibetans refused to eat before, because of the high prices in restaurants.