

Yak on the Move: Transboundary Challenges and Opportunities for Yak Raising in a Changing Hindu Kush Himalayan Region

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Yak on the Move: Transboundary Challenges and Opportunities for Yak Raising in a Changing Hindu Kush Himalayan Region

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Srijana Joshi, and Neha Bisht.
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Yak on the Move is a valuable gathering of perspectives from the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development's (ICIMOD's) territorial range of countries, extending along the Hindu Kush and Himalayan region. If ICIMOD needed a symbolic animal figurehead, surely it is the yak. The fate of this creature, which features in a series of beautifully photographed settings, somehow embodies the prospects for regional sustainable development writ large. The yak is known as "the universal animal" (p 181) for its contribution of meat, milk, wool, leather, transport, ploughing labor, and biomass energy.

The book develops a position in the introductory section, "Yak Herding and Challenges in the Hindu Kush Himalayas." Subsequent chapters then elaborate on this with examples and negotiate the impediments to healthy nutrition and pasture access, moving through the second section "Policy and Institutional Arrangements," before arriving at new vistas provided in the third section on "Hybridization and Cross-Breeding of Yak."

In the opening chapter, "Coping with Borders," Wu Ning and other authors very effectively situate the book in time and place. In almost every instance, the histories of

highland Asia geopolitics have had negative effects on populations of yaks and the diverse communities who live in their rangeland habitats and whose livelihood base is fundamentally linked to their care and their products. Borders and restrictions on movements have diminished nutritional availability and isolated the breeding populations, so that their health and future resilience have suffered. Along comes climate change, which further limits the patches of range that stay below the average of 13 °C that yaks can tolerate, throw in patterns of altered land use and social change that makes younger generations less keen on herding lifestyles, and the compound effect is not rosy. This book therefore draws together evidence for how yaks are faring and what interests there are in a yak economy in the different countries, and it offers some tantalizing policy area suggestions based on transboundary approaches that have been successful on other continents. There is furthermore a kind of structural neglect of the yak in national economies and of rangelands in conservation policy, and a distinctly marginalized audibility of the yak herders' voices, making their rightful role in policy making seldom realized. Overall, yak numbers are on a downward trend—and so is their health.

The book is therefore a call to action for yak-minded project workers and encouragement for development thinkers to adopt a yak's-eye view of interconnected problems, where the better outcome for yaks is more than likely of general benefit all round. It is notable that the main source of optimism in the book comes from China, where the vast majority (more than 13 million) of all yaks and yak crosses live; fewer than a million are located elsewhere. The breeding programs to work with wild genetic stock from Qinghai-Tibetan plateau have yielded important data such as the role of the β -chain of hemoglobin in the yak's response to

hypoxia, though the reasons for the sterile semen of hybrid males remains a mystery. Herd management innovations by breeding to reduce numbers of low-productivity animals are underway at the Datong yak farm in Qinghai. The inability of yaks in smaller rangelands with fewer numbers to partake of a wider gene pool can now be overcome with judicious programs of transnational artificial insemination.

While the book overall is skewed in favor of introducing new kinds of knowledge and advocating scientific management, other perspectives provide an appreciative nod toward local herders' knowledge and skills and the institutions that, in previous generations, worked well to enable mutual access across borders for human and animal complementary wellbeing. Dong and Yan's chapter on institutionalizing transboundary grassland management for sustainable yak production, from both sides of the Nepal-China border, has some excellent examples of positive grassroots management systems. However, they also acknowledge that spaces for two-way conflict do often show up among neighbors in the same country, when cross-border third parties have vacated the scene. Other chapters raise important questions about why there is reluctance among young people to become animal herders (p 131) but fail to even venture some understandings as to why other options are more appealing.

For this reviewer's social science inclination, it is a pity that biology, economic utility, and environmental science are so dominant when the relationships of people with these animals are so evident from the gorgeously rugged, companionable, and affectionate photographs of them munching grass and moving together with human guides. If the book serves the function it deserves to, in galvanizing some transboundary yakety-yak and resulting in programs of interdisciplinary work, it will be vital

to harness the broader social science understandings of high-altitude human livestock dynamics that are at play in this field. Pascale Dolfus's moving work on the sedentarization process of the Drokpa pastoralist community is referenced in the chapter on Ladakh, and Ken Bauer's study from Dolpo—that gives voice to local people's ire at the kinds of inappropriate interventions attempted by protected area authorities in regulating animal movements—is also mentioned.

The book is a first stab at taking stock and finding what is going on in different places. However, it is odd that none of the chapters on Nepal mention the Dairy Development Corporation, which has recently acquired organic export status for its most excellent “yak cheese” (actually from the hybrid *chauri*). There could indeed be very positive outcomes to seeing sustainability like a yak and connecting the threads of dispersed knowledge for transitions to improve life for these quadrupeds and their

bipedal dependents. Well done to the authors for getting this beast up and on the move.

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