Grassland Rehabilitation and Social Development in the Low Mountain Area of the Jinsha River Valley, China

Authors: Feng Mingyi, Yang Zhong, Deng Yulin, and He Jinfeng
Source: Mountain Research and Development, 23(2) : 124-127
Published By: International Mountain Society
Grassland Rehabilitation and Social Development in the Low Mountain Area of the Jinsha River Valley, China

Grassland degradation has become a serious environmental problem in semiarid areas, where it is responsible for land degradation and declines in livestock production. China has about 4,000,000 km² of grassland (cao di, ie, any land that is not classified as “forest,” “cultivated land,” or “no vegetation”), accounting for 40% of its total area, mainly in the middle and western parts of the country, where the economy is relatively underdeveloped. One third of the grassland in China is degraded, and degradation continues at the dramatic rate of 6700 km² per year. This has hindered animal husbandry development and social development in pastoral areas. Grassland rehabilitation has now become an urgent task of local economic development in western China. The Jinsha River valley (Yunnan Province), a main source of sediment for the Yangtze River, is characteristic of fragile ecosystems in western China. In this area, the primary development problems involve conflicts between ecological rehabilitation (especially restoration of grassland) and grazing. Serious degradation of soil and vegetation on account of the fragility is the result of both natural fluctuation and human intervention. To maintain social and economic sustainability, countermeasures are needed as quickly as possible.

The environmental situation

The dry hot valley in Yuanmou County is located 200 km from Kunming, in the middle and lower reaches of the Longchuang River, a tributary of the Jinsha River, covering an area of 446.88 km². This low mountain area (1100–1350 m) is characterized by very fragile grasslands and an underdeveloped economy. Different topographical zones in the valley show considerable diversity in microclimate, population, nationality, and land productivity.

In the plains, where moisture is plentiful and human intervention is significant, the quality of the microenvironment has been increasingly improved. This has led to population increase and significant crop yields in what can be regarded as the relatively developed area of the valley. This low mountain area where grasslands are widely distributed is densely populated by the Yi, Lisu, Hui, and Miao minority ethnic groups (Figure 1). The main original grass species were Heteropogon contortus, Aristida adscensionis, Bothriochloa ischaemum (L.) Keng, Cymbopogon distans (Nees ex Steudel) Will. Watson, and Chloris virgata Swartz. Grasslands have been greatly reduced because of destruction for cultivation since the 1970s. Extensive human activity has caused serious grassland degradation and severe soil and water losses and led to species change as well as reduced grass yield and diversity.

Causes of grassland degradation

Natural fluctuations

Overgrazing is the primary direct cause of grassland degradation. Traditional husbandry based on extensive grazing is the mainstay of the local economy (Table 1), but it inevitably brings about grassland destruction. Our survey of the area showed that most degradation comes from goat grazing (Figure 2). As the number of goats increases, grazed grassland becomes more fragile, coverage diminishes, and plant diversity declines. Husbandry development has now become dominant in the low mountain area in Yuanmou County. Almost all the goats, horses, donkeys, and oxen graze in the open air; hence grazing

“Desertified land formed by water erosion in the dry hot valley of Yuanmou County in Yunnan Province makes up 40% of the total area of the county.” (Prof Zhu Zhenda, Institute of Geography, Institute of Mountain Disaster and Environment and Desert Research, China)
Development

Land has become highly degraded through trampling. Destruction of grassland for cultivation has significant impacts. Extensive planting and cultivation take place on sparse slopes, where primitive production modes result in deeply eroded landforms. The search for simple sources of fuel in this rural region is another destructive factor.

Strategies for grassland rehabilitation

Grassland rehabilitation in the Yuanmou dry hot valley should involve natural restoration, prohibition of grazing, creation of protected areas, closing the area to cultivation, sustainable utilization, and financial and scientific assistance.

Prohibition of grazing

Although its progress is relatively slow, natural restoration is the practicable, optimum strategy. An experiment in 2000 with prohibition of manual intervention in 2 villages in Laocheng Township showed that 1 year later local herb and shrub species returned on degraded slopes and 2 years later vegetative cover and wet biomass reached 95% and 928 g/m², increases of 400–600% and 170–430%, respectively. Meanwhile, species diversity increased.

TABLE 1: Revenue from animal husbandry in Yuanmou County, as a percentage of agricultural revenue, in millions of yuan (RMB). (Source: Yuanmou Husbandry Administration. Revenue is based on prices in 1990.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agricultural revenue (AR)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.26</td>
<td>141.6</td>
<td>180.44</td>
<td>198.54</td>
<td>265.34</td>
<td>328.42</td>
<td>357.96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Husbandry revenue (HR)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>16.30</td>
<td>45.56</td>
<td>47.50</td>
<td>52.75</td>
<td>66.23</td>
<td>79.84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AR:HR (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.30</td>
<td>11.51</td>
<td>25.25</td>
<td>23.93</td>
<td>19.98</td>
<td>20.17</td>
<td>22.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 1: Yi minority village in the increasingly densely populated Jinsha River valley, Yunnan Province. (Photo by Feng Mingyi)
rapidly. Grazing has been prohibited in the low mountain area under a recent policy of promoting rehabilitation. Implementation has demonstrated that grass can be rehabilitated in this manner.

**Introduction and popularization of fine grasses**

To refine the quality of grassland, in recent years the local government has encouraged farmers to construct artificial grassland on cultivated land in the low mountain areas. Thus fine drought-resistant species such as *Medicago sativa*, *Rumex*, *Lolium perenne*, *Tephrosia candia*, *Vetiveria zizanioides*, and *Macroptilium atropurpureum* have been introduced and popularized. The yield of *M sativa* can reach 23–30 t/ha (dry biomass), whereas *V zizanioides* can reach 8–10 t/ha (dry biomass). This artificial grassland not only produces high yields but also prevents soil and water loss while providing plentiful fodder for farm animals. These introductory explorations have achieved success and been popularized in some locations in the dry hot valley.

**Government subsidies to farmers**

An underdeveloped economic structure and previous lack of financial support were key problems in restoration of grassland in Yuanmou. But since 1999, the implementation of a national project of converting farmland on slopes into forestland or grassland, combined with foreign financial investment, has encouraged both the local government and farmers engaged in animal husbandry. Farmers became active in protecting grassland environments as never before because this had the potential to guarantee their basic requirements in the long term.

**Scientific and technical assistance**

Although farmers in the low mountain area are poor, what they really lack is advanced scientific knowledge and production techniques. Their main concerns focus on earning cash through exporting labor or extensive grazing. But because of their lack of education and awareness, they lapse into poverty without scientific and technical assistance. Industrialized husbandry and campaigns to eliminate poverty in the low mountain area thus require scientific and technical assistance. The government should establish training workshops to promote advanced breeding techniques, and regional demonstrations of research activities should also be arranged in different localities. In addition, grassland protection, rehabilitation, and antipoverty campaigns should be features of legislation in both local and national policy-making.

**Prohibiting cultivation and fostering ecological migration for rehabilitation**

A campaign sponsored by the government since 1999 to prohibit cultivation in order to promote forest and grassland growth has been undertaken in western China. It has been warmly welcomed by local farmers and has had a positive effect. But it is impossible to rehabilitate forests in the dry hot area because of the lack of moisture in the dry season. Afforestation has
failed several times since the 1950s. Hence, grassland rehabilitation is the best and most practical form of ecological rehabilitation in the low mountain area in the dry hot valley (Figure 3). To rehabilitate the grassland swiftly, the local government should help farmers create protected areas for rehabilitation. Cultivation and open grazing should be strictly prohibited in the core protected areas. On the other hand, inhabitants of these areas can be relocated to the low plains in the dry hot valley.

Conclusion

Grassland rehabilitation should be integrated with local economic development and efforts to eliminate poverty. The practicable and optimum form of grassland rehabilitation is to prohibit grazing in favor of natural rehabilitation. Establishing areas for rehabilitation and ecological migration in core protected areas is an effective measure that can lead to sustainable development of husbandry and of society. To maintain sustainable grassland utilization and husbandry development, the government should establish utilization rights on grassland and improve contracting systems for grassland and livestock, determine the grazing capacity according to the quality of grassland, revise livestock structure, change traditional husbandry patterns of quantity to a modern pattern of quality and benefit, and implement rotational grazing in non-core protected areas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This investigation was funded by a Chinese National project entitled “Comprehensive Rehabilitation Technique and Demonstration in the Fragile Ecological Zones of Western China” during the 10th Five-Year Planning Period (2001BA606A-07).

AUTHORS

Feng Mingyi, Yang Zhong, Deng Yulin, and He Jinfeng
Chengdu Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Chengdu 610041, People’s Republic of China.

Feng Mingyi is a PhD candidate at the Chengdu Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment, Chinese Academy of Sciences, and an associate professor at Sichuan Teachers’ College. His research focuses on ecological rehabilitation and soil and water conservation. mingyifeng@sina.com

Yang Zhong is a researcher at the Chengdu Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment, Chinese Academy of Sciences. His research focuses on land degradation and its control in the dry hot valleys. He is currently leading a project on fragile ecosystem rehabilitation in the dry hot valleys. yangzhong@sina.com

Deng Yulin is an associate professor at Sichuan Agriculture University and a PhD candidate at the Chengdu Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment, Chinese Academy of Sciences. yulindeng66@vip.sina.com

He Jinfeng is a PhD student at the Chengdu Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment, Chinese Academy of Sciences. His research focuses on ecological rehabilitation. jinfenghe2001@hotmail.com

FURTHER READING


