

## **SHIELDING THE MOUNTAINS**

### **BASIC INFORMATION**

Title: Shielding the Mountains

Running time: 20 minutes

Year of release: 2010

Language of dialogue and subtitles: Tibetan and Chinese; English subtitles

Topics: Environmental movements, indigenous knowledge, Tibet/China, culture and nature

Credits: Produced by Emily Yeh; Directed by Kunga Lama; Written by Emily Yeh;

Narration by Giulia Bernardini; Post production manager Djuna Zupancic; Edited by Jeff Loda and Djuna Zupancic; Graphics by Djuna Zupancic; Audio Mix by Wind over the Earth, Jason McDaniel, Jesse Zimmerman; Camera operators Kunga Lama, Chime Namgyal, Rinchen Samdrup, Emily Yeh; Funded by National Geographic and National Science Foundation

### **SYNOPSIS**

Why have Tibetans become environmentalists? How do Tibetan conceptions of nature differ from Western ones? What is the relationship between culture and nature? This film explores these questions through a narrative that features Rinchen Samdrup, the leader of a Tibetan community environmental association in a remote area of Chamdo in the eastern Tibet Autonomous Region, and Tashi Dorje, a leading Tibetan environmentalist in China who first became interested in conservation after the death of a good friend at the hands of Tibetan antelope poachers. Viewers learn about the formation of coalitions of Chinese and Tibetan environmentalists that make Rinchen's work possible, as well as about the religious, cultural, and personal motivations for Tibetan environmentalism, and its basis in a particular understanding of the landscape, of what "nature" is, and why it should be protected.

## STUDY GUIDE

### CHARACTERS

#### *Rinchen Samdrup*

Founder of the grassroots environmental group in Tserangding, Chamdo, Tibet Autonomous Region (the group is named the Voluntary Environmental Protection Association of Domed Anchung Sengge Namzong). His grandfather taught him to plant trees when he was a child and he was inspired to put up environmental protection posters during the 1997 circumambulation festival of the local sacred mountain.



#### *Tashi Dorje (Zhaduo)*

Secretary of the Snowland Great Rivers Environmental Protection Association in Qinghai province. He became motivated to protect the environment after the death of his close friend Jesang Sonam Dargye at the hands of Tibetan antelope poachers in Kekexili. His visit to Chamdo helped motivate villagers there to form their association.



#### *Nyala Changchub Dorje*

Early twentieth century Tibetan Buddhist teacher from Nyarong who lead a community of religious practitioners in Nyalagar, in Tserangding, and was the grandfather of Changchub Wangmo, Rinchen Samdrup's wife. Also a practitioner of Tibetan medicine, he is the most revered Buddhist teacher in the valley where the grassroots association is based. His teachings are a key inspiration for Rinchen Samdrup and other villagers to protect the environment.



#### *Changchub Wangmo*

Granddaughter of Nyala Changchub Dorje and wife of Rinchen Samdrup, Changchub Wangmo is a very devoted religious practitioner as well as active member of the grassroots environmental protection association.



*Chime Namgyal*

Rinchen Samdrup's younger brother, Chime Namgyal was also very active in organizing villagers for environmental activities including tree planting, wildlife monitoring, patrolling against poachers and garbage cleanup. He had an incurable back condition until a lama told him it was due to a broken juniper branch that his family propped back up.



*Jesang Sonam Dargye*

A Tibetan party secretary in western Qinghai province, he worked together with Tashi Dorje to protect the vast, high altitude Kekexili region from Tibetan antelope poachers, until he was killed by poachers in 1994, galvanizing the Chinese environmental movement as well as Tashi Dorje's commitment to environmental protection.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is the Tibetan Plateau an environmentally important area?

*The headwaters of Asia's major rivers are on the Plateau, which is extremely sensitive to climate change. The Plateau is also home to significant terrestrial biodiversity and stores a significant amount of carbon (with implications for climate change).*

2. What relationship is posited in the film between human health and the environment? That is, how do certain aspects of the environment or parts of "nature" cause or alleviate diseases? Give several examples. How do these relationships map on (or not) to your understandings of "nature"? What does this suggest about the relationship between nature and culture?

*Examples include the injury to a frog with a sickle that caused a wound to appear in the exact same spot on the man's back, Chime Namgyal's back problem due to a tree with a broken branch, the prohibition against defiling springs, and Rinchen Samdrup's explanation of Nyala Changchub Dorje's teaching that cutting a branch off a tree would take a year off one's life. Note also the language of injuring the land, and of environmental protection being like blood circulating through the body.*

*These are very different ideas about cause and effect than are typical in Western or American views of nature, and express a closer and different relationship between the state of human bodies (their health) and the health of specific non-human elements of the world, such as trees, springs, and frogs. As Americans, we might look upon these views and consider them to be specific to "Tibetan culture" rather than reflecting some kind of "natural" underlying reality. But just as Tibetans have culturally specific ideas about nature, so do Americans or Westerners. In what ways are our ideas of nature also culturally constructed?*

*The very term "nature" is one of the most complicated in the English language given the many different meanings that get mapped onto a single term. Even though humans are considered part of nature, we also sometimes think of ourselves as being separate from nature, particularly where we talk about the "preservation of nature" as something that requires the absence or removal of any kind of human influence. But the very idea that we are looking at something called "nature" vs. "not-nature" is already a cultural classification.*

See also:

Castree, Noel. 2005. *Nature* (Key Ideas in Geography). Routledge.

Castree, Noel and Bruce Braun (eds.) *Social Nature: Theory, Practice and Politics*. Blackwell.

*In the Light of Reverence* (documentary). 2001. Christopher McLeod and Malinda Maynor. Distributed by Bullfrog Films.

Sacred Land Film Project: <http://www.sacredland.org>

Yeh, Emily T. 2009. "From wasteland to wetland? Nature and nation in China's Tibet." *Environmental History* 14(1): 103-137.



3. Rinchen first became active and consciously interested in environmental protection as such in 1997, during the circumambulation of the local sacred mountain, which had been deforested and polluted. He began to use the term “environmental protection” after he came into contact with Tashi Dorje and other Chinese and Tibetan environmental groups. Yet he planted many trees and learned the teachings of Nyala Changchub Dorje in his childhood. In what sense, then, was he an “environmentalist” prior to 1997? What is an environmentalist?
4. Which two religiously based conceptions are discussed prominently in the film as examples of how traditional Tibetan cultural and religious concepts are actually forms of environmental protection?

*Ri rgya rngon khrims* literally translates as “caging/shielding/netting (rgya) the mountains (ri) and hunting (rngon) laws/regulations (khrims), which is shortened in the film as “Shielding the mountains.”

*Snod bcud mthun spyor* or *snod bcud do mnyam* (both are used) translates as the harmony/union/friendship (*mthun spyor*) or balance/equilibrium (*do mnyam*) of “the container and its contents” (*snod bcud*), or the inanimate and animate world as container and contents, the vessel-like external worlds and their inner contents of sentient beings, vase and substance, world and beings.

5. How is “shielding the mountains” or “the container and the contents” similar to or different from what you usually think of as “environmentalism”? Is it environmentalism? What do the Tibetans discussed in the film do in the name of protecting the environment that is similar to or different from what Americans do? If you wanted to apply the idea of “shielding the mountains” and “the container and the contents” to a contemporary environmental issue, or to your own life, what would that imply in terms of how to think about ‘nature’? What would it imply for your actions and behaviors or those of environmental protection advocates? How would the Tibetan environmental groups’ work be different if they adopted common American ideas about nature or the environment?
6. In what way does Tashi Dorje implicitly critique western conservation? How does he think that Tibetan environmental protection differs from western views and models? What do you think of these different views? What concrete examples from the film and from your knowledge about other places, and from your own experience, can be used to support these different models or views?

*Recall his statement that “In the Tibetan approach to environmental protection, all living beings are equal. The western approach designates certain places as protected and leaves other places out....The livelihood and outlook of local farmers and nomads are central to successful environmental protection.” This is a critique in multiple ways of the US model of nature reserves and the ideal of wilderness as unpeopled landscapes. Parks, particularly the “Yellowstone model” which has been exported around the world, seek to draw boundaries around areas to be*

*protected, but implicitly leaves the rest of the landscape as unprotected, zones that can be sacrificed. This model gives us little guidance on what to do for the vast majority of land. Furthermore, the history of parks has been one of displacing marginalized groups of people, often indigenous, who depended on the land for their livelihoods. They have often been blamed for not protecting nature, justifying their removal, when in fact in many cases local people have extensive environmental knowledge and sustainable practices, and their participation is absolutely necessary for conservation to work. Efforts to remove indigenous peoples have not only lead to widespread dispossession but also to the failure of conservation efforts.*

See also:

Brockington, Dan, Rosaleen Duffy and Jim Igoe. 2008. *Nature unbound: Conservation, capitalism and the future of protected areas*. Earthscan.

Cronon, William. 1996 *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*.

Nash, Roderick. 2001 (4<sup>th</sup> Ed). *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Yale University Press.

Neumann, Roderick. 2002. *Imposing Wilderness: struggles over livelihood and nature preservation in Africa*. University of California Press.

Spence, Mark. 1999. *Dispossessing the wilderness: Indian removal and the making of national parks*. Oxford University Press. What

7. What is the relationship between western, Chinese and Tibetan environmentalists in the film? What kinds of implications does this have beyond the story of Rinchen and his village?

*The Tibetan antelope campaign which contributed to Tashi Dorje's commitment to protect the environment, and thus to his support of Rinchen Samdrup's group, was launched in part through the efforts of American wildlife biologist George Schaller after he discovered the slaughter of the antelopes by poachers. A number of transnational organizations working in Tibetan areas, including Conservation International-China and The Nature Conservancy became quite interested in the potential for using indigenous knowledge, sacred lands, and religious authority to protect the biodiversity on the Tibetan Plateau. They worked closely with Chinese environmentalists who have also become quite interested in sacred lands as well as in Tibetan culture. This has marked an important shift in how at least some members of the dominant Han ethnic group in China view Tibetan culture. It has provided a space for Tibetan cultural practices and beliefs, important given the highly politicized situation of Tibetans and Tibetan culture within China. For many years, the major Han Chinese view of Tibetans was that they were backwards and barbaric, and that they needed to become more civilized by becoming more like the Han Chinese. The recognition of the value of practices of sacred lands and indigenous knowledge for conserving biodiversity provides a new view among at least some part of the dominant population of the worth of Tibetan culture.*

*Chinese environmentalists provided support for Rinchen's group, for example by helping them receive national recognition for their environmental protection work. Rinchen and his fellow villagers have different conceptions of nature and different aims than "biodiversity conservation" per se but they have found a way to come together with Chinese environmentalists as well as foreign environmentalists and conservation organizations to take action that each views as beneficial. International environmental efforts and large conservation organizations have often been very heavily criticized for the way in which they treat indigenous peoples and*

*marginalize local ability to act, but this appears to be a case where (until the arrests of Rinchen and his brothers) there was a quite productive collaboration between these different groups of environmentalists, across many cultural differences.*

*In addition, the film also portrays Tibetans living in the PRC as being very creative and active in maneuvering to protect the environment and doing things to express their own cultural beliefs. This portrait of Tibetan agency within China is often missing in dominant representations of Tibetans in the West, which usually focus on Tibetan Buddhism in a way that is not closely connected to society, or on Tibetan victimization and the politics of the Tibet Question.*

See also:

- Chapin, Mac. 2004. "A challenge to conservationists" *World Watch Magazine*. 17(6)
- Hathaway, Michael. 2010. "Global environmental encounters in Southwest China: Fleeting Intersections and 'Transnational Work.'" *Journal of Asian Studies* 69(2): 427-52.
- Morton, Katherine. 2005. "The Emergence of NGOs in China and their Transnational Linkages: Implications for Domestic Reform" *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 59(4): 519-32
- Sundberg, Juanita. 2006. "Conservation encounters: transculturation in the 'contact zones' of Empire." *Cultural Geographies* 13(2): 1-27.
- Tsing, Anna. 2005. *Friction: An ethnography of global connection*. Princeton University Press.
- Xu, Jianchu (ed). 2000. *Links between cultures and biodiversity: Proceedings of the cultures and biodiversity Congress 2000*, Yunnan Science and Technology Press.

8. Why do you think Rinchen and Trador are so insistent that these practices and forms of knowledge/belief are neither "religion" nor "superstition." How do they make these distinctions in their explanations of their practices?

*Recall that when Rinchen discusses the injury of the frog, which is a type of water deity (klu or naga), he says "we do not worship the spirit but we attend to it" and later that they burn incense and propitiate deities to balance the container and the contents, to bring harmony just as two people might restore harmony after fighting with each other. Thus, he says, it is a beneficial action; it is, however, not superstition, because they are not worshipping the deities as such. Tashi Dorje also stresses that indigenous knowledge is often sidelined or marginalized because it is called religion or superstition, but it is not.*

*In the tense political situation of contemporary Tibet, "superstition" and "evil cults" are banned, viewed as anti-modern and anti-state. Anything that risks being labeled superstition is thus dangerous because the practitioner can also be labeled as being anti-state and thus guilty of political crimes. In addition, the Chinese state's constant attempts to root out the influence of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama through regulations such as the ban in Lhasa on religious practice among anyone who receives a government salary or is a student, has created a situation where association with Tibetan Buddhism can also become politically suspect.*

9. According to official Chinese policy, there are no "indigenous people" in China because everyone is equally indigenous and there is (officially) no history of colonization. Tibetans are one of 55 recognized "minority nationalities." Yet Tibetans seem to fit very naturally in to discussions of indigenous environmental knowledge, and Tibetans are

frequently considered by scholars in discussions of “indigenous peoples.” In what sense does the term “indigenous” apply or not for Tibetans? If they are not “indigenous,” does the term “indigenous environmental knowledge” or “indigenous environmentalists” apply to what is portrayed in the film?

*Tibetans generally have not taken up the term “indigenous” to describe themselves. Within China, this is because of the national minzu, or nationality, which describes all ethnic groups in China as distinct nationalities or minzu. In official discourse, there has been no settler colonialism (as in the US or Australia), everyone is equally indigenous (and Chinese), and thus the category of indigeneity or indigenous peoples does not make sense.*

*One of the main advantages to claiming indigenous status for other groups has been to use form transnational alliances with other indigenous groups in order to more effectively press claims for greater autonomy and control over territory. This is very difficult in the current Chinese situation given that the government claims that Tibetans already have an autonomous region and all of the autonomy that they need. Any claims to further autonomy are treated as separatist in intent.*

*Nevertheless, in many other respects, Tibetans do appear to have many similarities to other indigenous groups around the world, for example in their marginality and difference from the mainstream culture that surrounds them, as well as with their expressed relationship to their territory and land. The official struggle, which is now for greater autonomy rather than complete independence, also fits within the transnational model of indigenous sovereignty. The adoption by mainstream Han environmentalists of views of Tibetan culture as beneficial for nature protection also has parallels with other indigenous groups around the world, for example with native Americans or with the Kayapo in Brazil. The claim to indigenous environmental knowledge might be a productive tool for Tibetan environmentalists, one that can help facilitate a conversation with other groups around the world, as well as with Chinese environmentalists, about both conservation and the value of Tibetan cultural practices and knowledge, even if the term “indigenous peoples” has not been widely adopted.*

See also:

- De la Cadena, Marisol and Orin Starn eds. 2007. *Indigenous Experience Today*. Berg.
- Dove, Michael. 2006. “Indigenous people and environmental politics.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 35:191-208.
- Ellen, Roy, Peter Parkes and Alan Bicker eds. 2000. *Indigenous environmental knowledge and its transformations: Critical anthropological perspectives*. Harwood.
- Hathaway, Michael. 2010 “The emergence of indigeneity: Public intellectuals and indigenous space in Southwest China.” *Cultural Anthropology* 25(2): 301-333.
- Li, Tania. 2000. Articulating indigenous identity in Indonesia: Resource politics and the tribal slot. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42(1): 149-179.
- Litzinger, Ralph 2006. “Contested Sovereignities and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund.” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review (PoLAR)* 29(1): 66-87.
- Yeh, Emily T. 2007. “Tibetan indigeneity: Translations, resemblances and uptake.” In Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn (eds.) *Indigenous Experience Today*. Berg, 69-97.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

### THE TIBETAN PLATEAU

The largest and highest plateau on earth, the Tibetan Plateau covers roughly 2.5 million square kilometers, or about 1/3 of the area of the continental United States. At an average of 4500 meters or about 15,000 feet above sea level, it is ringed by the Himalayas to the south, the Karakorum to the west, and the Kunlun mountain range to the north. Though most of the Tibetan Plateau is now within the borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC), it also encompasses higher elevation regions of Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bhutan. The Tibetan Plateau within the PRC accounts for almost ¼ of the total land area of the country. The Tibetan Plateau is sometimes referred to as “the Third Pole” because it is the world's third largest store of ice after the Antarctic and the Arctic. Like the North and South poles, it is also much more sensitive to global climate change, as average temperatures on the plateau have risen two to three times faster than the global average. The Tibetan Plateau is home to significant biodiversity, including many rare and endangered wildlife species such as the wild yak, Tibetan argali, Tibetan antelope (chiru), snow leopard, and black-necked crane. Its extensive alpine grasslands store a significant amount of carbon, of importance for future global climate change. The Tibetan Plateau is also the location of the headwaters of Asia's major rivers, including the Yangtze, Yellow, Mekong, Salween, Brahmaputra, Ganges and Sutlej.

#### *Resources:*

China Dialogue: The Third Pole <http://www.chinadialogue.net/debate/show/9-the-third-pole>

Harris, Richard B. 2007. *Wildlife Conservation in China: Preserving the Habitat of China's Wild West*. East Gate Books.

Schaller, George. 1998. *Wildlife of the Tibetan Plateau*. University of Chicago Press.

Tibet and Himalayan Library. <http://www.thlib.org/>

### TIBET'S RELATIONSHIP TO CHINA

China defines Tibet as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), which corresponds roughly to the area under direct control of the Tibetan government in Lhasa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the TAR covers only roughly half of the total land area in the PRC where Tibetans historically and currently live, and is home to less than half of the total Tibetan population within China. The other half of the people and territory are divided into parts of four other provinces: Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai, and Gansu. In Tibetan cultural geography, central Tibet is often referred to as U-Tsang, the northeastern area as Amdo and the southeastern area as Kham. These three “provinces” have very different dialects of Tibetan and regional patterns of dress.

All of these Tibetan areas were unified during the Tibetan imperial period, but political unity fell apart after the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Much of Kham and Amdo had strong cultural and religious ties to Lhasa, but considered themselves to be politically independent kingdoms and tribes, with allegiance to neither Beijing nor Lhasa. Today the official narrative is that Tibet became part of China during the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). Tibetans saw this not as pure subjugation, however, but rather as a patron-priest relationship in which the Mongols were secular patrons but Tibetans their religious (Tibetan Buddhist) guides.

The People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, and soon after, the People's Liberation Army marched into Tibet where the poorly equipped and unorganized army quickly surrendered. In 1959, an uprising in the capital, Lhasa, led to the exile of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and ultimately about 80,000 Tibetans who fled to India and Nepal. Tibet was then subject to collectivization, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and decollectivization and reform starting in the 1980s, like the rest of China. The 1980s were a time of cultural and political liberalization, until demonstrations erupted in Lhasa in 1987-89. Twenty years later, in the spring of 2008, the year of the Beijing Olympics and the 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the uprising in Lhasa, there were a series of over 100 protests across the Tibetan Plateau again greatly heightening tensions.

### *Resources*

Blondeau, Anne-Marie and Katia Buffetrille, eds. 2008. *Authenticating Tibet: Answers to China's 100 Questions*. Berkeley: University of California Press.  
Pommaret, Françoise. 2003. *Tibet: An Enduring Civilization*. Harry N. Abrams.  
Shakya, Tsering. 2000. *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947*. Penguin.

The Center for Research on Tibet <http://www.case.edu/affil/tibet>

Tibet Album: The album presents more than 6000 photographs by British visitors to Tibet, spanning 1920-1950. <http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/>

TibetInfoNet <http://www.tibetinfonet.net>

### **CHINA'S ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT**

China's first environmental non-governmental organization (NGO), Friends of Nature, was founded in 1994. By 2006, there were over 2700 officially registered groups. Like all NGOs in China, environmental groups face a series of hurdles and obstacles, put in place by an authoritarian government nervous about losing its grip on power. Among other things, all NGOs must register and obtain a government sponsor which has to take responsibility for the NGOs; no two groups can undertake the same kind of work in the same city or province, so branches are not allowed; and there are requirements on membership and bank assets that must be met before registration, presenting severe barriers for grassroots groups. As a result, many grassroots groups end up not registering, though this entails significant risk and danger as the arrest of Rinchen Samdrup and Chime Namgyal ultimately showed, while other groups register instead as businesses, on which they must pay tax. Despite the difficulties, the environmental NGO sector is larger and relatively more successful than some others, in part because the government sees the need to offload some of its environmental protection and monitoring duties onto non-state actors. There are also a very large number of environmental student groups across the country. Many of the early environmental campaigns, particularly in the 1990s with student groups in Beijing, focused on charismatic wildlife, much of which is found in the western part of China. Protests against pollution are very common given the severe environmental damage as well as harm to human health caused by industrial production. However, these issues more easily run up directly against the interests of local officials, who want to see production continue in order to earn income. Thus it is often harder to organize action against pollution than to protect wildlife.

Following the 2008 unrest across the Tibetan Plateau, environmental work by NGOs in Tibetan areas became much more sensitive there than had previously been the case.

#### *Resources*

Asia Society, China Green Project, <http://sites.asiasociety.org/chinagreen/>

China Dialogue, <http://chinadialogue.net>

China Environment Forum,

[http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=topics.home&topic\\_id=1421](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=topics.home&topic_id=1421)

Hildebrandt, Timothy and Jennifer Turner. 2009. "Green activism? Reassessing the role of environmental NGOs in China" in eds. Schwartz, J. and Shieh, S. *State and society responses to social welfare needs: Serving the people*. New York: Routledge.

Ho, Peter and Richard Louis Edmonds, editors. 2008. *China's embedded activism: opportunities and constraints of a social movement*. Routledge.

Litzinger, Ralph. 2007. "In search of the grassroots: hydroelectric politics in northwest Yunnan" in *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China*, Merle Goldman and Elizabeth Perry, eds. Harvard University Press, 282-299.

Lü, Hongyan. 2003. "Bamboo Sprouts after the rain: the history of university student environmental associations in China." *China Environment Series* 6: 55-66.

Morton, Katherine. 2007. "Civil society and marginalisation: Grassroots NGOs in Qinghai Province" in H. Xiaoquan Zhang, Bin Wu, and R. Sanders, eds., *Marginalisation in China: Perspectives on transition and globalisation*. Ashgate, pp. 239-256.

Yang, Guobin. 2005. "Environmental NGOs and Institutional Dynamics in China," *The China Quarterly* No. 181

## **SACRED LANDSCAPES**

#### *Resources*

## **MINING IN TIBET**

Globally significant reserves of copper, gold, silver, and zinc are found on the Tibetan Plateau, as are significant reserves of chromite, boron, lithium, borax, uranium and iron, and 100 other minerals. Total reserves are thought to equal more than 20 million tons of copper and 10 million tons of lead and zinc, including the Yulong Copper mine in Chamdo, China's second-largest copper mine. Large-scale mineral exploitation has increased significantly with the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in 2006. The Chinese government has been particularly interested in attracting global investment partners to mining in Tibet, including the widely reported case of Canada's Continental Minerals in the Shennongong copper-gold mine in Shigatse.

Among the many problems associated with mining are the loss of pasture for herders and the drying up or poisoning of water sources. In many pastoral areas, small-scale miners make deals with local officials, promising to clean up or compensate for environmental damage, but rarely if ever actually doing so. At the same time, there are cases of state-sponsored mining in nature reserves, even though this is illegal. Protests against mining in Tibetan areas are often silenced by treating them as hidden forms of separatism.



### Resources

*Mining Tibet: Mineral exploitation in Tibetan areas of the PRC*. 2002. Tibet Information network.

Canadian copper-gold mining in Tibet:

<http://www.tibetinfo.net/content/update/166>

<http://www.tibetinfo.net/content/update/24>

Fan, Maureen. March 10 2009. "A focus of Tibetan ire: Mining." The Washington Post.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/09/AR2009030902878.html>

The Tibetan Plateau Blog, <http://tibetanplateaublogspot.com>

### TIBETAN ANTELOPE

The Tibetan antelope, or chiru (or tsoe in Tibetan) has exceptionally fine fur, which provides insulation from the harsh climate of the northern Tibetan Plateau, where they live at elevations of up to 5,500 meters. Unfortunately, the fact that this antelope has the finest wool in the world makes it a target of poachers, who kill three to five chiru to make a single shatoosh shawl. Highly valued because they are extremely warm and so fine that one can fit through a wedding ring, shatoosh shawls were traditionally given as wedding gifts among the elite in India, but in the 1980s became must-have global fashion items, selling for as much as \$15,000 each. Some fashion advertisements claimed that the wool was brushed onto branches and collected by impoverished Tibetan children and that buying the shawls was thus an act of charity, when in fact the antelopes were being slaughtered by poachers each year by the tens of thousands and smuggled to Kashmir, where they were woven into shawls. Wildlife biologist George Schaller, who began to study the chiru and discovered its mass slaughter in the late 1980s, was instrumental in launching a transnational campaign to bring awareness to the problem both within China and internationally through the fashion industry. Around the same time, Jesang Sonam Dargye and his secretary, Tashi Dorje discovered that Tibetan antelope were being slaughtered in the Kekexili region, and started to patrol the area in an attempt to stop the outside poachers. The Tibetan antelope attracted the attention of China's first registered environmental NGO, Friends of Nature, and Jesang Sonam Dargye's death made him an instant martyr in China's environmental circles. It also solidified Tashi Dorje's commitment to environmental work, and brought him in contact with many Chinese and Tibetan environmentalists. Extensive global media coverage in 1999 and 2000 raised public awareness about the Tibetan antelope. Though the Chinese government established the Changtang Nature Reserve to save the antelope, and despite significant success in protecting the antelope and reducing their slaughter, they still remain endangered.

### Resources

The Story of Tsoe, <http://sites.asiasociety.org/chinagreen/story-of-tsoe/>

The movie *Kekexili* (2004, Chinese director Lu Chuan, distributed in the US by National Geographic as *Mountain Patrol*) is a partially fictionalized account of the Tibetan antelope hunting and murder of Jesang Sonam Dargye.

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/mountainpatrol/>

Rick Ridgeway, 2004. *The Big Open: On Foot across Tibet's Chang Tang*. National Geog.

<https://www.earthislandprojects.org/tpp/antelope.htm#articles>

<http://www.wcs.org/saving-wildlife/hoofed-mammals/tibetan-antelope.aspx>

## THE ARRESTS AND SENTENCING OF RINCHEN SAMDRUP, CHIME NAMGYAL AND KARMA SAMDRUP

In August 2009, Rinchen Samdrup and Chime Namgyal were arrested. Chime Namgyal was sentenced to 21 months in a labor camp (which does not require a trial) on charges of endangering state security through the work of the grassroots environmental association. The reason given was that it was not registered. Villagers had long attempted to register it, but were repeatedly rebuffed by local authorities. Rinchen Samdrup was sentenced in July 2010 to five years in prison for “incitement to split the nation.” He was charged with posting an article on the website of the environmental association (which he denied in court) that contained a sentence that stated “some people say Tibetans are barbarians, but one of us has won a Nobel Prize.” His charge and sentence were based on this oblique reference to the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. Karma Samdrup, their middle brother, and a prominent businessman, philanthropist, and environmentalist who founded the Snowland Great Rivers Environmental Protection Association, was arrested in January 2010 and sentenced in June 2010 to 15 years in prison on charges of grave-robbing. This was based on a brief arrest 12 years prior for purchasing what turned out to be looted antiques, though charges against him were dropped at that time given that he did not know the origins of what he had purchased. The charges against him appear to have been motivated by his attempts to free his brothers. Their original arrests appear to have been motivated by local politics and conflicts between villagers and their local leaders. In particular, a local police chief tried to hunt wildlife in the area and the villagers’ attempts to stop the hunting and what they viewed as abuse of power, by petitioning higher levels of government, invoked the ire of local officials who then sought revenge. They sought backing among higher level officials and managed to put an end to the environmental work despite the support for the association’s environmental work by prominent Chinese environmentalists as well as some government departments.

The most comprehensive English-language report can be downloaded from this site: Go to <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/> and scroll down to the August 4 2010 report “A sharp knife above his head”

See also

<http://www.highpeakspureearth.com/2010/07/rinchen-samdrup-sentenced-to-5-years.html>  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6620EZ20100703>  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/04/world/asia/04tibet.html>

From BBC, July 3 2010:

### **China 'jails Tibet activist for five years'**

A Tibetan environmentalist has been sentenced to five years in prison by a Chinese court, his lawyer has said.

Rinchen Samdrup, the third brother in his family to be jailed, was found guilty of inciting separatism in China, reports say.

Mr Samdrup, who had pleaded not guilty, was accused of posting a pro-Dalai Lama article on his website. The sentence comes just over a week after one of Mr Samdrup's brothers was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Authorities in China said an article on the Tibetan spiritual leader was posted on Mr Samdrup's website, the Associated Press news agency reported.

The website is devoted to protecting the environment in the Himalayan region.

Mr Samdrup told Changdu Intermediate People's Court that he did not post the article himself. His lawyer, Xia Jun, was quoted as saying: "It was a mistake, but not a crime." The lawyer did not say who posted the article on the website.

The sentence comes after his brother, a nationally known environmentalist once praised by the Chinese government as a model philanthropist, was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Karma Samdrup, 42, was found guilty of grave-robbing and dealing in looted antiquities. His lawyer said police had used false evidence.

Karma's supporters said the sentence was intended to punish his activism - including his attempts to free Rinchen and another brother from detention.

Rinchen and brother Chime Namgyal were held after accusing officials in eastern Tibet of poaching endangered species, AP reports.

International human rights groups say China has increased pressure on leading Tibetan figures since riots killed 22 people in the region in 2008.