

Tibet is the canary in the coal mine

The Dalai Lama's home country is warming at nearly three times the rate of the rest of the world

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by **Richard Gere**

It was Dec. 10, 1989, and the Dalai Lama had just emerged from his Oslo hotel in the winter dusk after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I was among supporters from all over the world waiting there to celebrate a symbolic moment — the first global recognition not only of this humble monk in exile but also of his cause, his land and the people and wisdom culture of Tibet.

In those simpler days, before he would be swept to presidential meetings in motorcades, the Dalai Lama walked among us. On that evening, he embraced us one by one as our candle flames flickered in the darkness. People started to sing spontaneously, in many different languages, but somehow it became one song, one language, one voice.

I recall this magical moment today with a particular poignancy, because this Dec. 10 coincides with the [COP21 climate talks in Paris](#) that are critical to the survival of our planet.

One of the reasons the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Dalai Lama was for his promotion of global interdependence and protection of the environment. In his acceptance speech, he said, “Both science and the teachings of the Buddha tell us of the fundamental unity of all things. This understanding is crucial if we are to take positive and decisive action on the pressing global concern with the environment.”

This vision has never been needed more, as governments

attempt to forge a global treaty to limit carbon emissions and bring financial assistance to the poor, who will be the worst hit by a threat that is potentially more catastrophic than any war or disaster ever known.

One of the most alarming findings by international scientists — among them, many Chinese — is that the Dalai Lama's home, Tibet, now under Chinese control, is warming nearly three times as fast as the rest of the earth. This matters to all of us. The size of Western Europe and the world's highest and largest plateau, Tibet, the roof of the world, is also known as the earth's third pole because it contains the biggest reserves of freshwater outside the Arctic and Antarctic. Its changing climate affects not only the monsoon in Asia but also weather patterns in Europe and across the rest of the Northern Hemisphere. Tibet may be the canary in the coal mine.

As the source of most of Asia's major rivers, including the Yangtze, the Mekong and the Brahmaputra, Tibet's fragile ecology is of critical importance to hundreds of millions of people in the water-dependent societies downstream. And yet, relatively unnoticed by the rest of the world, the Chinese government has built and is building dams on all the major rivers running off the Tibetan plateau — one of the most seismically active and unstable areas of the world — with potentially devastating consequences.

This blue planet is our only home, and Tibet is its roof. The Tibetan plateau needs to be protected, not just for Tibetans but for the environmental health and sustainability of the entire world.

Dalai Lama

In Tibet's vast grasslands, nomadic herders have for thousands of years made a sustainable living uniquely adapted to the harsh

conditions, migrating with their herds of yak and sheep according to the seasons. Now they are being displaced from their ancestral lands and removed to bleak concrete block settlements, resulting in both broken communities and increased environmental degradation.

This is despite the many authoritative Chinese voices — scholars and rangeland experts in the People's Republic of China — among a global scientific consensus that indigenous stewardship and herd mobility is essential to the health of the grasslands and to help mitigate climate change.

With its source glaciers rapidly retreating and with Tibet's river waters being diverted to Chinese cities far from the plateau, China is fulfilling its strategic objectives without regard to the needs of countries downstream. The transboundary implications of China's control over Tibet are starker than ever. Access to water has become a serious security issue throughout East and Southeast Asia.

Given its critical importance, the impact of climate change and freshwater scarcity on the Tibetan plateau is not only a regional but a global issue.

The Chinese leadership has acknowledged at the highest levels the scale of the environmental crisis it faces. The disastrous results of breakneck industrial growth over environmental sanity has now convinced many in China that tackling climate change and protecting the environment are in their national and personal interests. As increasing numbers of Chinese environmentalists and experts have made clear, this must include conserving the Tibetan plateau.

A 21st century commitment to sustainability requires a halt to the displacement of nomads from the Tibetan grasslands and the integrated participation of Tibetans in management of the land.

[A new report by the International Campaign for Tibet](#), published to coincide with COP21, highlights new strategies that are

required, based on inclusive dialogue that brings together vulnerable communities, regional and local governments and Chinese, Tibetan and other Asian scholars, scientists and NGOs. A regional framework for the governance and management of water resources urgently needs to be developed among all the nations in South and Southeast Asia, including China.

As the Dalai Lama says, “This blue planet is our only home, and Tibet is its roof. The Tibetan plateau needs to be protected, not just for Tibetans but for the environmental health and sustainability of the entire world.”

It is the world’s loss that, as a leader exiled from his country, the Dalai Lama could not be at the table in Paris. But it is imperative for us to pay attention to his words on the anniversary of that day in Oslo in 1989 by emphasizing in Paris and beyond that Tibet needs to be a serious priority in the global conversation on climate change.

And that — even given China's territorial claims — Tibet belongs to us all.

Richard Gere is the chairman of the [International Campaign for Tibet](#), which published a report, “[Blue Gold From the Highest Plateau: Tibet’s Water and Global Climate Change](#),” on Dec. 8, 2015, to coincide with the Paris climate talks.