

Response to “Rethinking Ecological Migration and the Value of Cultural Continuity”

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In our Synopsis (Wang et al. 2010), we illustrated the background, the achievements, possible problems and some suggestions on the ecological migration (EM) project in the Three-River Headwater (TRH, Sanjiangyuan) region, an area of 363,000 km² where 100,000 local herdsmen will eventually move out the core and buffer zones of the TRH reserve. Our main focus was that the EM project in the TRH region has made remarkable progress and may promote the sustainable development of the region if carefully managed. However, environmental and cultural consequences caused by EM can not be ignored.

It is commendable that China has established impressive environmental goals and has tried to protect the environment. However, in some cases, the forces of environmental destruction have overwhelmed protection efforts and have made many of the goals empty slogans (Liu and Diamond 2008). The following factors may play a major role leading to the failure of an ecological conservation program: (1) inability to implement the environmental protection policy, (2) absence of accurate inventory and proper planning, and (3) lack of support for research to find solutions. As Foggin (2011) and Wang et al. (2010) discussed, the EM could bring some potential environmental challenges in areas of migration destinations. In addition, the approach used in

the TRH region to remove herders out of the grasslands neglected the needs for grassland management. Livestock, in appropriate numbers, are good for the grasslands. Livestock eating and walking on the grass both stimulates growth and controls it. Without animal activity, the grass grows out of control. Also, after enclosure, grasslands are no longer fertilized by livestock excrement and over time only one or two species of grass will survive, homogenizing that population (Zhou 2006).

Despite the top leadership’s intention to protect and recover China’s environment, the evaluation system is biased towards economic development. Unrealistic top-down environmental policies can only do harm to the environment. Local government officials often mechanically follow the orders from their superordinates, achieving tangible results. A push from the bottom is badly needed to attract the attention of local governments to the environment (Zhang and Wang 2010). There is encouraging news that economic growth is no longer the factor determining the promotion of local government officials for the TRH region, although only this measurement will not change the overall situation (Zhang and Wang 2010). In addition, environmental awareness has been increasing among China’s populace. The public demands the right to speak out about environmental issues and to be engaged in environmental actions (Liu and Diamond 2008).

The fundamental aim of environmental protection is to improve the natural environment. However, we should not put it into practice at the cost of our cultural heritage. If environmental protection endangered cultural heritage, it will be compromised. EM might be a good way of reducing the human pressure on nature. However, as it is implemented, the colorful indigenous culture is under threat. Often the EM sites are the Chinese minority ethnic regions, they have formed their own ways of living for centuries.

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The cultural heritage is invaluable. Many indigenous people or ethnic minorities often have little power of discourse to choose the terms on which they wish to engage with the “outside world” (Foggin 2008). Wang et al. (2010) mentioned that possible efforts to retain Tibetan culture have been made during the EM. We think that the effectiveness of these efforts should be checked by time.

As pointed out by Foggin (2008), any proposed solution to conservation or development problems must be viable within the present socio-political context of contemporary China. Increasing numbers of both people and livestock are the roots of the TRH region’s environmental degradation, which is combined with poverty. The succession of large-scale relocations is undoubtedly one of the best choices to recover degraded environment and alleviate poverty in the short term, as indicated by Abulizi and Chen (2007). As investigated by West (2009), many migrants in Inner Mongolia of China feel that their lives have improved in key areas such as access to healthcare and schooling and access to more goods and services. For the TRH region, more household interviews, field investigation, and participant observations are needed to explore the effects of the EM.

Environmental protection is a big issue for China. Many forces (e.g., socioeconomic, political, demographic, and technological) influence the country’s environmental sustainability. There will be many more problems to deal with in environmental protection than the amount of problems previously faced by western countries. Today, when there is an urgent need for China to pay close attention to its environmental protection, what we need to do is not only make political and social efforts, but also pay attention to the cultural aspects of environmental protection.

The arguments we mentioned above showed that the EM in the TRH region could be a good choice in a short term but is not a cost-effective alternative (in economic and environmental terms) in the long run. Local governments have realized this circumstance and decided that, 10 years later, people can choose to settle permanently in towns or go back to their grasslands. We argue that the wise way to change the present situation is to generate environmental education and change the people’s behavior. It needs the involvement and effort of the society rather than central and local governments. Even more important is to seek and give opportunity for local voices to be heard as often as

possible. Under these circumstances, community co-management approaches could be trialed and popularized if proved by practice. Although it will not be easy to make these fundamental changes, there is hope that they can happen.

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