

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of *Tibet Wild: A Naturalist's Journeys on the Roof of the World*, by George B. Schaller

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Abstract

Book details: Schaller, George, B.

Tibet Wild: A Naturalist's Journeys on the Roof of the World.

2012, Island Press, Washington, DC, 372 pp., 9 maps, 2 tables, 32 photos.

US\$ 29.95 ISBN 978-1-61091-172-6

Keywords: Tibetan plateau, Chang Tang, Tibetan antelope, Marco Polo sheep, Snow leopard

Review

The Tibetan Plateau in Western China is one of the world's largest rangeland ecosystems, providing habitat for numerous, unique wildlife species and supporting over two million nomadic pastoralists, who make their livelihoods by raising yaks, sheep, goats, and horses. It is also the headwaters' environment for many of Asia's rivers such as the Yellow, Yangtze, Mekong, Salween, Brahmaputra, Ganges, Indus and Sutlej Rivers. As environmental concerns for the future of the Roof of the World gather increased worldwide attention, George Schaller's account of thirty years of exploration, wildlife research and conservation efforts on the Tibetan Plateau is an important addition to our knowledge of this region.

The book is organized into an Introduction and fourteen chapters, and includes a final Selected References of books and articles of direct relevance to the book, as well as very helpful Index. There are nine maps that assist in orienting the reader geographically to the topic being discussed. Eight chapters deal with the Chang Tang, the vast alpine steppe area of the northwestern Tibetan Plateau (about twice the size of the state of Montana), where Schaller much of his time conducting research on the Tibetan antelope, or *chiru*. In the chapter, *Feral Naturalist*, the author describes his evolution as a naturalist and is probably best summed up in the following sentences: 'Whatever the explanation, I like to ramble over wild topography or sit quietly to watch an animal in its universe so different from mine. A naturalist basically wanders and observes. That is what I have loved to do as far back as memories take me.' This chapter provides an interesting introspective on Schaller's youth in Germany, his time in Alaska where studying at the University of Alaska opened the natural world to him, in which he has sojournd for over sixty years, and his early fieldwork in Africa with gorillas, in India on an ecological study of the tiger, in the Serengeti National Park on

a study of lions, his work in Pakistan and Nepal in the 1970s, and the panda project in China in the early 1980s. Two chapters focus on southeast Tibet, a wild, mostly forested landscape of great diversity that still supports tigers. Here, the author also provides interesting information on the history of exploration in the area. The often disparaged pika, an important small mammal in Tibetan rangelands, is the focus of one chapter. Another chapter deals with the Tibetan brown bear, which is increasingly in conflict with Tibetan nomads. There is also a chapter on the snow leopard, the little-known cat of the Tibetan and Himalayan highlands that also preys on nomads' livestock. One chapter deals with the Pamir, the rugged mountainous region located to the west of the Tibetan Plateau where the Marco Polo sheep is found. Here, Schaller describes his work in Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and China and the international cooperation that will be required to protect the 'grandest of all wild sheep'.

Schaller's easy-to-read style of writing draws a reader in, enabling one to see what he is observing and to gain an intimacy with the Tibetan Plateau. *Tibet Wild* also provides a rare peek into what makes Schaller, a gifted writer and winner of many international conservation awards, endure the travails of conducting fieldwork in Tibet at elevations mostly above 14,000 feet and in winter temperatures that plummet to -35C. Writing of the solitude of the Chang Tang, Schaller says, 'Yet the desolation and boundless emptiness is to me what makes this wilderness so exceptional, and its perils have left it beautiful, largely devoid of development. I find my emotional center and am comfortable in a place like this. Certainly it suits my inner landscape, reflecting a certain self-contained spirit.' And upon completing a traverse of the Chang Tang in the fall of 2006: 'Our route has covered a cross-country distance that equals New York to Chicago or Paris to Warsaw or Delhi to Calcutta, and the whole is uninhabited except for the chiru and other wildlife. Where else in the world can one still do this? Where else can one stand on a hill, eyes sweeping across plains to distant snow ranges in all directions, and know that no other humans are there for mile after mile? Such solitude touches the soul.' One day while waiting for transport to be organized, he writes, 'Tong and I climb high into a valley of the Seru Kangri and there we meet a lynx. The sky is clear but the wind roars and pounds us without respite. I happily hike over plains and into mountains all day, feeling fit and content to be on foot.'

The migratory Tibetan antelope, probably more than any other animal, delineates the vast expanse of the Tibetan Plateau. As Schaller notes, '...as I grew to know them better, and become aware of the great chiru migrations, I realized that their travels defined the landscape. Protect the chiru, and all other species in the region, the whole ecosystem, would benefit.' Interesting information on the ecology of the Tibetan antelope and the challenges to conserving it and its habitat is provided in the first five chapters of the book. In the words of Schaller, 'To learn as much as possible about chiru became a personal quest, almost an indulgence, and it gave direction and coherence to much of my work on the Tibetan Plateau. To save one of the last great migrations of a hoofed animal in Asia, surpassed in number only by the million Mongolian gazelles on the eastern steppes of Mongolia, is important for itself, as well as to China and the world.' The maps on pages 32 and 46 depicting the current distribution of chiru and its migratory routes are especially helpful in understanding the movements of this unique animal.

Tibet Wild, however, is more than just a naturalist's narrative on wildlife. It is of particular value to those interested in nomadic pastoralists and to people focused on

developing rangeland environments in a practical manner that takes into account the needs of both wildlife and nomads with their animals. In discussing the Chang Tang, Schaller writes, 'To become familiar with an area that is still healthy, productive and diverse, one still unspoiled by humankind, has a special appeal. It is not a matter of surveying the last orangutans in Sarawak or searching for saola in Laos, as I have done, but of conserving vigorous populations of all animal and plant species in an ecosystem. Conservation has in recent decades focused on rain forests, with their great diversity of species, whereas attention to rangelands, which cover 40 percent of the earth's land surface has languished. Yet rangelands too display biological treasures in beauty, variety, and uniqueness.' With most of the Tibetan Plateau comprised of rangelands, conserving the Tibetan ecosystem is going to require improved understanding of the ecology of the rangelands and increased participation of nomad communities in development and conservation programs. Schaller provides valuable insight into how nomads could be more involved in participatory approaches to management of the rangelands that takes into account the needs of both livestock and wildlife.

The Chang Tang, which is a largely undisturbed rangeland ecosystem, provides the rare opportunity to do conservation on a landscape scale. Schaller notes, 'Here one could address the conflicting demands of conservation, development, and the livelihood of its pastoral people, and here conservation would not need to be confined to a protected area of modest size but could involve a vast landscape, one larger than many countries. Good management options persisted and solutions to problems could be applied based on solid science, sound policy, and local support, drawing on the knowledge, interests, and participation of the area's communities.' Throughout *Tibet Wild* Schaller documents his field experiences in the day-to-day work of preserving large tracts of Tibetan wildlands.

The importance of *Tibet Wild* for those interested in rangelands and nomads is probably best encapsulated in this statement by Schaller, 'The conservation goal now, as before, is to manage the rangelands, livestock, and wildlife in dynamic stability, to maintain ecological wholeness.' A common theme in the book is the importance of engaging pastoral communities in conservation efforts. Schaller provides valuable insight into what it will take to work with the nomads to conserve the Tibetan landscape and to maintain the ecosystem for future generations. Throughout the book, Schaller discusses the local people he is traveling among or working with. For someone trained as a zoologist, Schaller's interest in, and empathy with, the local people helps explain his focus on a conservation approach that needs to include local communities. Among the Wakhi and Kyrgyz in Afghanistan, Schaller notes, 'I like to learn about these local cultures, not only out of personal interest but also because such knowledge helps me to fit in. Every culture is full of unspoken rules that are all too easily trampled.' Wise counsel for anyone wanting to work with foreign cultures.

In this computer-centric world we now live in, Schaller, who has spent over fifty years conducting fieldwork and promoting wildlife conservation throughout the world, understands the value of time spent in the field: 'I console myself that natural history remains the cornerstone of conservation, that it must be learned on the ground, asking questions, observing, listening, taking notes, getting the boots muddy. Technology helps to open the world but technology can also close it unless one learns directly from nature.' The following passage about the snow leopard is an interesting example of his

passion for understanding wild animals and the mountains they live in and the field-work that is necessary: 'I examined each scat with special interest. A sniff gave an idea of its freshness. Picked apart, the hair and bone fragments reveal what the cat had eaten. Long, curved incisors and tan, black-tipped hairs are from marmot, brittle grayish hair from blue sheep, or curly white wool from domestic sheep, to mention just three. Sometimes I stumbled on a kill, wild or domestic. I recorded species, sex, approximate age, and physical condition, and saved the lower jaw for determining age at death more precisely from the tooth wear. Scuff marks and tracks gave an indication of how the animal was ambushed, and tooth and claw marks show how it was killed. Was the body warm? How much had been eaten?' The ability to ask these kinds of questions comes from lots of time spent in the field. Schaller also has an uncanny ability to synthesize arcane bits of zoological data into easily understood facts about Tibetan wildlife and their habitats, greatly improving the reader's understanding of the ecology of the Roof of the World.

In the Introduction, Schaller pointed out that the book is 'part observation and part evocation.' And it is in its evocation that Schaller's words need to be heard. The last paragraph in the book has an important message: 'Everyone from official and trader to shopkeeper and pastoralist need to change habits and expectations. We must work together, all of us, rich and poor, with passion, persistence, and an everlasting commitment to assure all living beings a future. There must be a covenant with the land that decries compulsive consumption, waste, and needless destruction. We have to adapt to an era of limits. We have to arouse everyone by addressing their needs and values, whether moral, esthetic, religious, or nationalistic. Conservation much also reach the emotions, the heart, not just the mind: it must stimulate people into action. We must make this a century of environmental enlightenment, one that expresses its loyalty to the earth with all its wonder and variety, the only home we shall ever have.'

George Schaller has made twenty-six trips to the Chang Tang, as well as numerous trips in eastern Tibet, and it would have been nice to have seen a large, foldout map of his combined journeys on the Tibetan Plateau, like those that were often included in the books by 19th century explorers of Tibet. But that is only a minor critique of a very informative account of three decades of observing wildlife and wild landscapes on the Tibetan Plateau. In conclusion, *Tibet Wild* is a fascinating book of a little known part of the world. It should be read by anyone interested in the Tibetan Plateau. Field biologists, range ecologists, pastoral development specialists, tourists and even Tibetan monks will all find something of interest in Schaller's evocative writing.

Daniel Miller works for the U.S. Agency for International Development, and is currently based in Manila, Philippines.

Competing interests

I have no competing interests.

Received: 5 February 2013 Accepted: 6 February 2013
Published: 15 March 2013

doi:10.1186/2041-7136-3-6

Cite this article as: Miller: Review of *Tibet Wild: A Naturalist's Journeys on the Roof of the World*, by George B. Schaller. *Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice* 2013 **3**:6.