



LESSON PLAN

The Value of Ancient Traditions



RELATED PHOTO ESSAY

Drokpa: The Nomadic Mountain People of Tibet

BY DIANE BARKER



Class: 60 minutes

Key Idea

Like many traditional cultures around the world, the nomads of Tibet are losing their unique way of life as they become increasingly integrated into modern China. Nomads from this region hold traditional knowledge passed down from generations, which has cultural and ecological value for the future.

Background

For thousands of years, nomadic peoples have herded yak and other livestock throughout the high altitude grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau in what is now Western China. Using knowledge passed down through generations, with the support of tribal communities, nomadic pastoralists have survived in extremely rough conditions. Nomads live primarily from what they create from their herds and they endure rain, snow, drought, and altitudes averaging nearly 15,000 ft.

After China invaded Tibet in 1950, the Chinese government implemented a variety of policies designed to control the Tibetan grasslands and their human and natural resources, including fencing pasturelands and relocating nomads into villages and cities. According to the Human Rights Watch, since 2006, over 2 million Tibetans—including hundreds of thousands of nomads from the eastern Tibetan Plateau—have been “reoused” through government-ordered programs.*

China’s stated goals for relocation include reducing poverty, improving education, and improving quality of life for the nomads, as well as protecting the environment of the Tibetan Plateau—a major water source for the world—from over-grazing. But not everyone agrees that the policies serve the people or the environment of the Tibetan Plateau. According to *The New York Times*, the ecological foundation for relocation is “dubious” and anthropologists cite “chronic unemployment, alcoholism, and the fraying of millenniums-old traditions” as some consequences of relocation.**

In this photo essay, “Drokpa: the Nomadic Mountain People of Tibet,” Diane Barker documents scenes from Tibet’s high altitude grasslands from the years 2000 to 2015. Earlier photographs portray the wild beauty of Tibet and the natural spirituality of the nomadic people, while later photographs reveal the effects of relocation and modern technology on the nomads’ traditional lifestyle.

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- Environmental Science
- Geography
- Modern World Studies
- Sociology

COLLEGE

- Cultural Anthropology
- Environmental Studie
- Geography
- Sociology

THEMES

- Vanishing cultures
- Ancient cultures
- Human connection to the environment
- Effects of modernization

MATERIALS

- World map
- Access to the photo essay online (or printed copies of it)

PREPARATION

- None



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*Human Rights Watch, "[China: End Involuntary Rehousing, Relocation of Tibetans.](#)" June 27, 2013.

**Andrew Jacobs, "[China Fences In Its Nomads, and an Ancient Life Withers.](#)" *The New York Times*, July 11, 2015.

Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.11-12.1.c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

Common Core English Language Arts. W.9-10.3 and W.11-12.3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Geo.6.9-12. Evaluate the impact of human settlement activities on the environmental and cultural characteristics of specific places and regions.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Geo.2.9-12. Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Show students a map of the Tibetan Plateau within China, pointing out the mountain ranges on all sides, including the Himalayas on the south. Tell students Tibet is known as the "land of the snows," because the average altitude of this area is almost 15,000 feet. Ask students if they have heard of Tibet or of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. What information have they heard, read, or viewed? From what sources? The Dalai Lama is a Buddhist monk, who fled Tibet when the



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Chinese invaded that country in 1950. He was forced to flee and in 1959, he began a permanent exile in India. The Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, which recognized his nonviolent campaign to cease the Chinese domination of Tibet.

Explain to students that today, nomadic peoples who have lived close to the land for thousands of years are being pressured to leave their homes in the grasslands of Tibet and resettle into modern Chinese villages. Even the nomadic peoples who are retaining their traditions are propelling towards modernization with the increased exposure to technology such as cell phones, television, motorbikes, and energy improvements.

Ask students what their own lives might be like if they gave up cell phones, computers, and television. What would be lost if students resisted these forces of modernity? What might be gained?

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Introduce the photo essay by explaining that students will be viewing photographs taken by British photographer Diane Barker. The photos document the lives of nomads, or Drokpa, who live in the high altitude grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau. Explain that the Drokpa way of life is threatened due to Chinese policies that restrict the use of pastoral land and force the relocation of nomads into villages and towns.

Ask students to read the photographer's statement. In pairs or small groups, ask students to view the photo essay taking note of the main activities of the Drokpa people. Students will take note of the differences of photographs 1-18, which were taken in 2000 and 2001, to photographs 19-30, which were taken in recent years.

What changes have impacted the nomads and their environment between these two time periods?

Delving Deeper

After viewing the photo essay, lead a discussion with such questions as:

- Describe the main activities of the Drokpa people as depicted in the photo essay. List the activities that include or depend on animals or products made from animals. (Answers include: milking



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yak, making yak butter, sleeping in yak-hide tents, sleeping on sheepskin, and riding horses).

- Photograph no. 5 depicts a woman milking a yak. According to the caption for this photograph, what is another Tibetan word for “yak”? What does it mean in English? What does this say about the nomads’ relationship with yak? (Answer: In the Tibetan nomad dialect, *yak* is also known as *nor*, which in English means “jewel” or “wealth,” which suggests a relationship of great value.)
- What factors, depicted in the photo essay, are threatening a traditional Tibetan nomadic lifestyle? (Answers include: climate change, cultural influences like access to technology, and forced relocation.)
- Summarize the changes between the two time periods—the first part of the photo essay and the second part of the photo essay. What has been introduced into the lives of the nomads? What do you notice has disappeared?
- One relocated Tibetan nomad interviewed for the Pulitzer Center, explains his new life. He said, “Life is more convenient now, but I worry that Tibetan culture is disappearing.” Which photographs reflect this trend of increased convenience and “disappearing” culture? What is disappearing?
- Photographer Diane Barker asked a Drokpa woman how she feels about relocation and the woman replied, “Nomad life is the best because we have yogurt, milk, cheese, and yak meat that we can produce by ourselves. We don’t want to buy these kinds of products from another place.” What might be the value for the nomads of producing these foods?
- Author Helena Norberg-Hodge writes about the people of Ladakh, another Himalayan region that is home to the Drokpa, “Can the Ladakhis’ natural ebullience and *joie de vivre* survive the pressures of modernization?” (*Joie de vivre* is a French phrase that translates as “exuberant enjoyment of life.”) What do you think the photographer’s response would be to this question? What is your own response?



Reflecting and Projecting

1. In her book, “Ancient Futures,” author Helena Norberg-Hodge includes a 1981 quote from a development commissioner in Ladakh, an area of India bordering Tibet, which is also home to the Drokpa. The commissioner said, “If Ladakh is ever going to be developed we have to figure out how to make these people more greedy. You just can’t motivate them otherwise.” The author described when she first arrived in Ladakh there wasn’t much greed or the desire for material things. However, over the last 30 years, new needs have been created. Imagine you were to write a letter to this commissioner with the intention of convincing him that the Ladakh people should not be persuaded to become “greedy.” Use the photographs and captions in this photo essay as evidence in your letter. (C3.D2.Geo.6.9-12)
2. The first 18 photographs from the photo essay document nomadic life approximately 15 years ago, while the second 12 represent nomadic life in recent years. One influence depicted in the later series of photographs is the presence of technology in the form of cell phones and television. Write a paragraph explaining the positive and negative effects of technology based on your own experiences. How does technology affect your life? Using the photos as evidence, include in your paragraph what you have noticed by comparing the older photographs from the first part of the photo essay to the more recent photographs in the second part of the photo essay. What are your observations as phones and televisions entered the nomads’ lives? Do you notice similarities to your own life? If so, what? (CCSS.ELA.W.9-10.3 and W.11-12.3)
3. In an interview with the BBC, photographer Diane Barker says, “For me the success of my work is related to how much I can capture the inner wealth, beauty and dignity of the people I photograph and then to touch people’s hearts with the results.” Do you think Diane Barker has achieved her goal in this photo essay? Why or why not? Select four photographs as evidence and write a paragraph explaining your answer. Do your selected photographs reflect Barker’s statement? If so, how? (C3.D2.Geo.2.9-12)



Resources

Sean Gallagher, "[The Last Nomads of the Tibetan Plateau.](#)" The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, October 25, 2012.

Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures, 3rd Edition* (USA: Local Futures, 2016).

Jane Qui, "[Slow drowning of Tibetan grasslands fenced in by Beijing.](#)" SciDevNet, January 13, 2016.

Jonathan Watts, "[Tibetan nomads struggle as grasslands disappear from the roof of the world.](#)" *The Guardian*, September 2, 2010.

Rachel Willis, "['Tibetan Lives' by local photographer.](#)" BBC Hereford & Worcester, April 15, 2002.