
Herders' and livestock professionals' experiences on past and future developments in yak farming in Bhutan

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In Bhutan yak-based transhumant systems are influenced by socioeconomic developments, regulations, and environmental changes. Little is known about the impact of these factors on yak farming practices. The aim was to study perceptions and experiences of yak herders and livestock professionals on past and future developments in yak farming. Yak herders in three regions (west, n = 22; central, n = 20; east, n = 25) and livestock professionals (n = 28) were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. Our results show that at present forage shortage in the rangeland (herders, 93%; livestock professionals, 96%), yak mortality (herders, 96%; livestock professionals, 96%) and to a lesser extent labour availability (herders, 30%; livestock professionals, 96%) are the main concerns in yak farming. Some factors causing forage shortage, however, are specific to certain regions, e.g. competition with the horse population (west, 91%) and prohibited burning of rangelands (central, 80%; east, 76%). Overall, the market to sell yak products and livestock extension services has improved, whereas forage shortage and yak mortality has increased over the years. In addition, family labour available to herd yaks, as well as the number of young family members to take over yak herding has decreased over the years. These key concerns have increased due to socioeconomic developments and strong conservation policy, which also affects the living environment of the yaks. Despite the challenges experienced by herders in yak farming, the majority of herders (81%) wish their children to take up yak farming in the future. About half of the respondents (57%), however, think that yak farming households will decline in the next 10 years. For a sustainable future of yak farming in Bhutan active policy involvement seems to be required to reduce uncertainties and increase livelihood perspectives.