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The UNCCD Global Land Outlook Thematic Report on Rangelands and Pastoralists is available for preview online at <https://bit.ly/4dv7ZPL>

Authors are available for advance interviews.

They will also take part in the report launch, webcast from Ulaanbaatar at

<https://www.youtube.com/@THEUNCCD>, on Tuesday 21 May, 2024 at 07:00 GMT / 08:00 UK

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Photos: <https://bit.ly/3UqU31m>, video: <https://bit.ly/3U8K9QI>

‘Silent Demise’ of Vast Rangelands Threatens Climate, Food, Wellbeing of Billions: UNCCD

Rangelands cover 54% of all land; as much as 50% are degraded, imperilling 1/6th of humanity’s food supply, 1/3rd of Earth’s carbon reservoir

UNCCD report points way to restore, better manage rangelands, urges protection of pastoralism

Bonn/Ulaanbaatar – Degradation of Earth’s extensive, often immense natural pastures and other rangelands due to overuse, misuse, climate change and biodiversity loss poses a severe threat to humanity’s food supply and the wellbeing or survival of billions of people, the UN warns in a stark report today.

Authors of the **Global Land Outlook Thematic Report on Rangelands and Pastoralists**, launched in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia by the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), say up to 50% of rangelands are degraded.

Symptoms of the problem include diminished soil fertility and nutrients, erosion, salinization, alkalinization, and soil compaction inhibiting plant growth, all of which contribute to drought, precipitation fluctuations, and biodiversity loss both above and below the ground.

The problem is driven largely by converting pastures to cropland and other land use changes due to population growth and urban expansion, rapidly rising food, fibre and fuel demands, excessive grazing, abandonment (end of maintenance by pastoralists), and policies that incentivise overexploitation.

What are rangelands?

The rangelands category of Earth's land cover consists mostly of the natural grasslands used by livestock and wild animals to graze and forage.

They also include savannas, shrublands, wetlands, tundra and deserts.

Added together, these lands constitute 54% of all land cover, account for one sixth of global food production and represent nearly one third of the planet's carbon reservoir.

“When we cut down a forest, when we see a 100-year-old tree fall, it rightly evokes an emotional response in many of us. The conversion of ancient rangelands, on the other hand, happens in ‘silence’ and generates little public reaction,” says UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw.

“Sadly, these expansive landscapes and the pastoralists and livestock breeders who depend on them, are usually under-appreciated,” Mr. Thiaw adds. “Despite numbering an estimated half a billion individuals worldwide, pastoralist communities are frequently overlooked, lack a voice in policy-making that directly affects their livelihoods, marginalised, and even often seen as outsiders in their own lands.”

Mongolia Environment Minister H.E. Bat-Erdene Bat-Ulzii says: “As custodian of the largest grasslands in Eurasia, Mongolia has always been cautious in transforming rangelands.

Mongolian traditions are built on the appreciation of resource limits, which defined mobility as a strategy, established shared responsibilities over the land, and set limits in consumption. We hope this report helps focus attention on rangelands and their many enormous values – cultural, environmental, and economic – which cannot be overstated. If these rangelands cannot support these massive numbers of people, what alternatives can they turn to?”

Mongolia will host the 17th UNCCD Conference of the Parties meeting in 2026, the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP), declared by the United Nations General Assembly on Mongolia's initiative.

Two billion people – small-scale herders, ranchers and farmers, often poor and marginalised – depend on healthy rangelands worldwide.

Indeed, in many West African states, livestock production employs 80% of the population. In Central Asia and Mongolia, 60% of the land area is used as grazing rangelands, with livestock herding supporting nearly one third of the region’s population.

Ironically, the report underlines, efforts to increase food security and productivity by converting rangelands to crop production in mostly arid regions have resulted in degraded land and lower agricultural yields.

The report calls out “weak and ineffective governance,” “poorly implemented policies and regulations,” and “the lack of investment in rangeland communities and sustainable production models” for undermining rangelands.

An innovative approach

The new report’s 60+ expert contributors from over 40 countries agree that past estimates of degraded rangeland worldwide – roughly 25% – “significantly underestimates the actual loss of rangeland health and productivity” and could be as much as 50%.

Rangelands are often poorly understood and a lack of reliable data undermines the sustainable management of their immense value in food provisioning and climate regulation, the report warns.

The report details an innovative conceptual approach that would enable policy-makers to stabilise, restore and manage rangelands.

The new approach is backed by experience detailed in case studies from nearly every world region, drawing important lessons from successes and missteps of rangeland management.

A core recommendation: protect pastoralism, a mobile way of life dating back millennia centred on the pasture-based production of sheep, goats, cattle, horses, camels, yaks, llamas or other domesticated herbivores, along with semi-domesticated species such as bison and reindeer.

Says Mr. Thiaw: “From the tropics to the Arctic, pastoralism is a desirable default – and often the most sustainable – option for that should be incorporated into rangeland use planning.”

The economic engine of many countries

Rangelands are an important economic engine in many countries and define cultures. Home to one quarter of the world’s languages, they also host numerous World Heritage Sites and have shaped the value systems, customs and identities of pastoralists for thousands of years.

The report includes detailed analyses of individual countries and regions.

For example, livestock production accounts for 19% of Ethiopia's GDP, and 4% of India's. In Brazil – which produces 16% of the world's beef – fully one-third of agribusiness GDP is generated by cattle livestock.

In Europe, many rangelands have given way to urbanisation, afforestation and renewable energy production.

In the United States, large tracts of grassland have been converted to crops, while some Canadian grasslands have been made fragile by large-scale mining and infrastructure projects. There are also many positive notes such as, for example, growing efforts in both countries to reintroduce bison – an animal of great cultural importance to indigenous peoples – to promote rangeland health and food security.

World areas most acutely affected by rangelands degradation, ranked in descending order:

Central Asia, China, Mongolia

The replacement of government management and oversight with privatisation and agricultural industrialization left herders abandoned and dependent on insufficient natural resources causing widespread degradation.

The gradual restoration of traditional and community-based pastoralism is leading to critical advances in sustainable rangeland management.

North Africa and Near East

The impact of climate change in one of the world's driest regions is pushing pastoralists into poverty and degrading the rangelands on which they rely.

Updated traditional institutions, such as Agdals – reservoirs of fodder used to feed animals in periods of critical need and allowing for the regeneration of natural resources – and incipient supportive policies are improving the way rangelands are managed.

Sahel and West Africa

Conflict, power balance and border issues have interrupted livestock mobility leading to rangelands degradation.

Unified policies, recognition of pastoralists' rights and cross-border agreements are reestablishing mobility for animal herders, crucial for landscape restoration.

South America

Climatic change, deforestation linked to industrialised agriculture and extractive activities, and land use conversion are South America's main drivers of rangeland degradation.

Multifunctionality and diversity of pastoralist systems hold the key for restoring some of the most interesting rangelands in the world, including the Pampa, the Cerrado and Caatinga savannahs, and the Puno Andean systems.

East Africa

Migration and forced displacement caused by competing uses of land (such as hunting, tourism, etc), are evicting pastoralists from their traditional lands, causing unanticipated degradation consequences.

Women-led initiatives and improved land rights are securing pastoralists' livelihoods, protecting biodiversity, and safeguarding the ecosystem services provided by rangelands.

North America

The degradation of ancient grasslands and dry rangelands threatens the biodiversity of iconic North American ecosystems such as the tall-grass prairies or the southern deserts.

The incorporation of indigenous people to rangeland governance is a clear step to help recover these historic landscapes.

Europe

Policies favouring industrial farming over pastoralism and misguided incentives are causing rangelands and other open ecosystems to be abandoned and degraded.

Political and economic support, including legal recognition and differentiation, can turn the tide and help address critical environmental crises such as the rising frequency and intensity of wildfires and climate change.

South Africa and Australia

Afforestation, mining, and the conversion of rangelands to other uses are causing the degradation and loss of rangelands.

The co-creation of knowledge by producers and researchers, and respect for and use of traditional wisdom held by indigenous communities, open new paths for restoring and protecting rangelands.

Paradigm shift

Halting the deterioration requires a paradigm shift in management at every level – from grassroots to global, the report concludes.

Pedro Maria Herrera Calvo, the report’s lead author, says: “The meaningful participation of all stakeholders is key to responsible rangeland governance, which fosters collective action, improves access to land and integrates traditional knowledge and practical skills”.

Achieving “land degradation neutrality” (Sustainable Development Goal 15.3) – balancing the amount and quality of healthy land to support ecosystem services and food security – also requires cross-border cooperation.

Pastoralists with generations of experience in achieving life in balance with these ecosystems should help inform this process at every step, from planning to decision-making to governance, the report noted.

Solutions must be tailored to the characteristics and dynamics of rangelands, which vary widely from arid to sub-humid environments, as seen in West Africa, India or South America.

The report notes that traditional assessment methods often undervalue the real economic contribution of rangelands and pastoralism, highlighting the need for the innovative approach recommended.

Among key recommendations:

- Integrated climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies with sustainable rangeland management plans to increase carbon sequestration and storage while boosting the resilience of pastoralist and rangeland communities
- Avoid or reduce rangeland conversion and other land use changes that diminish the diversity and multifunctionality of rangelands, especially on indigenous and communal lands
- Design and adopt rangeland conservation measures, within and outside protected areas, that support biodiversity above and below ground while boosting the health, productivity, and resilience of extensive livestock production systems

- Adopt and support pastoralism-based strategies and practices that help mitigate harms to rangeland health, such as climate change, overgrazing, soil erosion, invasive species, drought, and wildfires
- Promote supportive policies, full people's participation and flexible management and governance systems to boost the services that rangelands and pastoralists provide to the whole society.

ADDITIONAL KEY FIGURES

- 80 million sq. km: Area of the world's terrestrial surface covered by rangelands (over 54%)
- 9.5 million sq. km: Protected rangelands worldwide (12%)
- 67 million sq. km (45% of Earth's terrestrial surface): Rangelands' area devoted to livestock production systems (84% of rangelands), almost half of which are in drylands. Livestock provide food security and generate income for the majority of the 1.2 billion people in developing countries living under the poverty threshold
- 1 billion: animals across more than 100 countries maintained by pastoralists, supporting 200 million households while providing about 10% of world meat supply, as well as dairy, wool and leather products
- 33%: global biodiversity hotspots found in rangelands
- 24%: proportion of world languages found in rangelands
- 5,000 years ago: When pastoralism first emerged as a land-use system in sub-Saharan Africa

REGIONAL FACTS & FIGURES

- Over 25% and 10%: Supply of world beef and milk, respectively, provided by Latin America's cattle industry
- Over 25%: GDP of Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad attributed to livestock production
- Over 50%: land in the Middle East and North Africa regions deemed degraded (25% of arable land)
- 60%: area of Central Asia and Mongolia used as grazing rangelands, with livestock herding supporting nearly one third of the region's population

- 40%: area of China covered by pastoral lands. (Notably, the country's livestock population tripled between 1980 and 2010 to 441 million livestock units)
- 308 million hectares: area of the contiguous United States covered by rangelands, 31% of the country's total land area, with ~55% of rangelands privately owned

Additional comments

“Imbalance between the supply of and demand for animal forage lands leads to overgrazing, invasive species, and the increased risk of drought and wildfires – all of which accelerate desertification and land degradation trends around the world.”

“We must translate our shared aspirations into concrete actions - stopping indiscriminate conversion of rangelands into unsuitable land uses, advocating for policies that support sustainable land management, investing in research that enhances our understanding of rangelands and pastoralism, empowering pastoralist communities to preserve their sustainable practices while also gaining tools to thrive in a changing world, and supporting all stakeholders, especially pastoralists, to implement measures that effectively thwart further degradation and preserve our land, our communities, and our cultures.”

- Maryam Niamir-Fuller, Co-Chair, International Support Group for the UN's International Year for Rangelands and Pastoralists – 2026

For the sake of future generations and economic stability, we need to improve awareness of and safeguard the immense value of rangelands. Due to their dynamic nature, predicting the consequences of rangelands degradation on economics, ecology, and societies is challenging. Managers require authoritative insights into the response of rangelands to different disturbances and management approaches, including policy tools that better capture the broad social importance of rangelands.

- Carlos Manuel Rodríguez, CEO and Chairperson, Global Environment Facility

“More than half of the world's land mass is rangeland – and yet these landscapes and the people who inhabit and manage them have been largely neglected. They are a main source of food and feed for humanity, and yet they are also the world economy's dumping ground. It is time to shift perspective – from ‘a rangeland problem’ to ‘a sustainable rangeland solution’.”

- UN International Year of Rangelands & Pastoralists (IYRP) Working Group

“Pastoralists produce food in the world's harshest environments, and pastoral production supports the livelihoods of rural populations on almost half of the world's land. They have traditionally suffered from poor understanding, marginalisation, and exclusion from dialogue. We need to bring together pastoralists and the main actors working with them to join forces and create the synergies for dialogue and pastoralist development.”

- UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO)

“To have any chance of meeting global biodiversity, climate and food security goals, we simply cannot afford to lose any more of our rangelands, grasslands and savannahs. Our planet suffers from their ongoing conversion, as do the pastoralists who depend on them for their livelihoods, and all those who rely on them for food, water and other vital ecosystem services. The Global Land Outlook reinforces that too little political attention or finance is invested in protecting and restoring these critical ecosystems. National and sub-national authorities must take place-based action to safeguard and improve the health and productivity of rangelands, grasslands and savannahs – to benefit people and planet.”

- Joao Campari, Global Food Practice Leader, WWF

"The rangelands of the world sustain two billion small-scale herders, ranchers and farmers. They are a source of food and feed to the world, and their ecology contributes to biodiversity and carbon sequestration. Resilient as they are, today pastoral communities face compounding challenges where land degradation, driven by climate variability, poses a serious threat to both production and economic growth. Solutions with the full participation of pastoralists and flexible management and governance systems to boost the services that rangelands and pastoralists provide will benefit everyone. This report underscores the need for ongoing dialogue and actionable measures that can propel resilience and prosperity for pastoral communities across the world."

- UNDP Midori Paxton, Nature Hub Director

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About UNCCD

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is an international agreement on good land stewardship. It helps people, communities and countries create wealth, grow economies and secure enough food, clean water and energy by ensuring land users an enabling environment for sustainable land management. Through partnerships, the Convention's 197 parties set up robust systems to manage drought promptly and effectively. Good land stewardship based on sound policy and science helps integrate and accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, builds resilience to climate change and prevents biodiversity loss.

<https://unccd.int>

About the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists

On the initiative of Mongolia, the United Nations General Assembly has designated 2026 the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP 2026) to enhance rangeland management and the lives of pastoralists. With this declaration, UN Member States are called upon to invest in sustainable rangeland management, to restore degraded lands, to improve market access by pastoralists, to enhance livestock extension services, and to fill knowledge gaps on rangelands and pastoralism. The IYRP 2026 will coincide with the UNCCD COP17 to be hosted by Mongolia.

<https://iyrp.info>