

Over recent decades Iran's pastoralists have been experiencing changes that have totally altered the social, political and economic landscapes through which they must navigate. To discover the impact of these changes on local breeds, a group of pastoralists were gathered from throughout the country to discuss their experiences. The dialogue was facilitated by Taghi Farvar and Maryam Rahmanian of Iran's Centre for Sustainable Development (CENESTA)

# Pastoral life in Iran: a changing landscape

CENESTA

**Taghi Farvar:** We all know that the numbers of traditional breeds are decreasing rapidly. What can we do to keep these breeds?

**Mostafa Parvizi:** If there was more support for keeping traditional breeds then we would keep them because we know that they are well-suited to the environmental conditions; but since there is no support we are forced to choose the new or mixed breeds. We're no longer able to make a living from this work and we are having to sell our sheep. Pastoralists need better support from the government.

**Maryam Rahmanian:** But in the past there was no government support and yet you were able to sustain your livelihoods. What is different now?

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** There are many factors: our costs were lower, the rangelands were healthy, the sheep were much healthier, there was less disease, droughts were much less frequent...

**Taghi Farvar:** What are some of the advantages of the traditional pure breeds?

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** The traditional breeds make do with whatever plants and shrubs are available, whereas the new breeds only graze on the best shrubs. When those are finished we have to buy feed for them. The new breeds are not well-suited to their environments – we all know that they are not as resistant to cold and drought as the traditional ones.

**Aras Mohammad Shirmohammadi:** It's not just sheep. Turkmen horses are very special: they have very high endurance, they don't become as thirsty and hungry as the mixed breeds.

**Reza Derakhshani:** The traditional *Sangesar* sheep is well-known throughout Iran for its good meat and for being very well suited to dry and mountainous environments because it is small and very nimble. It can also make do with the poorest desert shrubs



## The changing fortunes of Iran's pastoralists

In 1986, census officials estimated that pastoralists in Iran totalled 1.8 million (out of a total population of 50 million). The true number of tribally organised people, both nomadic and sedentary, may be twice that figure. Iran's pastoralists practice transhumance, migrating in the spring and in the fall. Each tribe claims the use of fixed territories for its summer and winter pastures and the right to use a specified migration route between these areas. The camps may be separated by as much as 600 kilometers and migrations may take up to two months to complete.

Traditionally, Iranian pastoralists have kept a variety of domestic animals, especially large herds of sheep and goats. In this overwhelmingly dry and mountainous country, pastoral life is an ingenious response to the harsh environmental conditions. During migrations the tribes trade their live animals, wool, hair, hides, dairy products, and various knotted and woven textiles with villagers and townspeople in return for manufactured and agricultural goods that the nomads are unable to produce. This economic interdependence between the nomadic and settled populations of Iran has been an important characteristic of society for several centuries.

Because of its strong pastoralist past, Iran has been an important centre for livestock diversity. There are 27 local breeds of sheep recorded, 22 local camel breeds, 6 local cattle breeds, 10 indigenous chicken breeds and 20 indigenous horse breeds. Some of these local breeds are now in serious danger of extinction, including najdi and adni goats, sarabi and golpaigani cattle, kurd turkaman, khazar and arab horses, marandi chickens, and two humped camels.

During the Qajar period (1795-1925), confederations of pastoralist tribes acquired a great deal of power. In many areas they were virtually autonomous and negotiated with the local and national governments for extensive land rights. Reza Shah, who took power in 1925, sought to break the power of the great tribal confederation leaders. Using a combination of military, economic and administrative techniques he largely succeeded. Some were given government-built houses and forced to follow a sedentary life.

As a result, the herds kept by the nomads were unable to obtain adequate pasture, and there was a drastic decline in livestock. When Reza Shah abdicated in 1941, many nomadic tribes returned to their former lifestyles - at least for a while.

Mohammad Reza Shah, the next ruler, continued the policy of weakening the political power of the nomadic tribes, but efforts to coerce them to settle were abandoned. Tribal pastures were nationalised in 1963 as a means of permitting the government to control access to grazing. In addition, various programs were implemented to encourage the tribes to settle voluntarily. Nationalisation of the range lands had a big impact on pastoralist groups. Traditionally, agriculture was managed on a collective basis. Nationalisation meant that land that had ancestrally belonged to nomads and held as common property was alienated from them. Since then the nomads have had to obtain individual grazing permits based on a state expert assessment of the carrying capacity of the range. The assumptions on which this capacity was based have now been shown to be fundamentally flawed. But this system of issuing individual short term permits still persists, and means that the nomads are unable to work together to apply the principles of sustainable use. It also means that the government, which is unable to manage the rangelands (about 90% of the usable land in the country), has now decided to give it to the private sector - but usually not to the traditional holders of rights to the range. Rather, it is being given to those with power and influence, who use it, more often than not, for speculation.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 saw the Shah, a hereditary monarch, replaced by the radical Islamic leader Ayatollah Khomeini. After the Revolution, several former tribal leaders attempted (unsuccessfully) to revitalise their tribes as major political and economic forces. Many factors impeded this development, including the hostile attitude of the government and the decline in nomadic populations as a result of resettlement in previous decades.

Source: US Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/irtoc.html>; Iran's Ministry of Agricultural Jihad: [www.agri-jahad.org](http://www.agri-jahad.org)



*The winter pastures of the Koobi Subclan of the Qashqai tribal confederation, one of the most powerful tribal confederations during the 19th century*

and its fat tail helps it survive through extreme cold and drought. It has great endurance which is important for us since we have to travel long distances and the migration period lasts two months. We have to transport the new breeds by van for part of the migration route because they have poor endurance and they just can't make it on their own.

**Maryam Rahmanian:** If traditional breeds are much better suited to the environment, why have they been replaced with new breeds?

**Reza Derakhshani:** The drought over the past years has made our work very unprofitable.

**Tarrahom Jahedi:** It's also a question of changing needs. We used to breed camels for transporting goods, but now people use cars – even pastoralists use them because after the Revolution [see box opposite] many new roads were built all over the country. In the past it took about 16 days and 10-20 camels to migrate. Now with cars and trucks there's no need for camels.

**Ghassem Parvizi:** Changing patterns of agriculture have also had an impact. In our region there are about 40 households and all used to keep sheep and plant wheat and barley. But now they plant turnips, cucumbers or lentils so they have less cereals for the sheep.

**Reza Derakhshani:** Of course there are various reasons in each region for the decline of traditional breeds, but I think it basically comes down to a matter of cost. Our costs kept increasing till about 10 or 15 years ago when keeping the traditional Sangesar breed just wasn't cost effective anymore. The new breeds are better suited to consumer demand. The Sangesar sheep are small so there's not that much meat and they have large fat tails, but people avoid animal fat these days because they say it's bad for you. The new breeds we have adopted are larger, with less fatty tails.

**Taghi Farvar:** It seems that you are much more dependent on the market than you used to be.

**Reza Derakhshani:** Yes, in the past we only sold our extra male sheep, what we could spare and no more.

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** Today there are so many pressures on us that we are forced to sell our livestock under price – we are forced to sell our best mating sheep.

**Abbas Ali Banaa'ian:** From about 1354 [March 1975–March 1976] we thought we could make more money with larger breeds of sheep. We took out loans to introduce new breeds. But then things started going downhill. Our costs increased rapidly because we had to buy feed for them. Unfortunately it didn't occur to us then to consider whether the new breeds were suited to our environment or not.



Some of the 20 pastoralists gathered for the meeting. Miriam and Taghi of CENESTA are at back left. CENESTA ([www.cenesta.org](http://www.cenesta.org)) is an Iranian NGO which has been active in the country for more than 20 years. CENESTA is currently Chair of the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy ([www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp](http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp))



**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** Our traditional breeds managed with whatever was available – and because the rangelands were healthier there was much more available. For example, our sheep used to go into the desert in the winter and there was plenty for them to graze on. Now we have to buy feed for them. We did that very rarely in the past – for instance, because of drought. And there are many other increased costs. We have to pay rent for the rangelands, and the high rates promote over-grazing.

**Taghi Farvar:** What brought about this greater dependence on the market?

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** The change came after the Revolution because at that time our rangelands were taken over for agriculture. Land reform policy which was introduced in the time of Mohammad Reza Shah [in 1963], but the process has accelerated since the Revolution.

**Reza Derakhshani:** Land reform led to the nationalisation of the rangelands. Before nationalisation land ownership was concentrated in a few hands. I think nationalisation was a good thing in principle, but unfortunately some people took advantage of the new system.

**Taghi Farvar:** Before land reform, were there local systems of collective management?

**Abbas Ali Banaa'ian:** Yes, there used to be a good system of dividing the use of the rangelands. After nationalisation the government took control but it didn't know how to manage the land. It gave permits to some individuals to use the land [thus destroying traditional community management systems].

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** After land reform, influential people managed to get their hands on the best rangelands and converted them for agricultural use - especially those that were near main roads. They even took over the springs that our sheep used to drink from for their orchards. Some of them sold the land off just to make a quick profit. The latest trend is that they sell the land to wealthy people from Tehran who want a villa in the countryside.

**Abbas Ali Banaa'ian:** Over time the government may have learned from its mistakes to some extent but it's too late now. It was around 1372 [March 1993 – March 1994] when the government started becoming more sensitised to the issues. Before this there was no control – anyone who wanted to take advantage of the system was able to.

**Maryam Rahmanian:** Were some individuals from local communities able to get land permits?

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** Yes, but it made no difference. I have a permit but no one listens.

**Haj Hossein Asghari:** I also have an official permit but the land has been taken over all the same.

**Maryam Rahmanian:** So the nationalisation of the rangelands led to the break up of community management. What effects did this have on your communities?

**Abbas Ali Banaa'ian:** It brought about a big change in our lives. Cooperative work within the family doesn't exist anymore. In the past the extended family would go to *yeylaagh* (summer pastures) and work together. We used the milk and wool – not just the meat – because there were enough people to do that labour-intensive work. But now that we don't have that labour force anymore and our livestock are more geared towards meat production. The older generation are too old to do the work and the younger generation will not.

**Reza Derakhshani:** I think that cultural issues are the most important factor. Young people simply will not do this work; they don't want to look after livestock. Children who have gone to school will not do this work. Today, most of our shepherds are refugees from Afghanistan.

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** The new generation is different; our grandchildren tell us that we smell bad! So we have to pay for someone else to do the work. We pay the shepherds half the net profit and that doesn't leave much for us; we only have enough for personal use – not for sale. Sometimes we even end up in debt.



The Qashqai, who number 250,000, have some of the longest and hardest migration routes of Iran's pastoralists, travelling up to 600 km from summer to winter pastures.

**Taghi Farvar:** What have been the environmental consequences of land reform?

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** The rangelands have been destroyed. The best lands were taken over for agricultural use. The new owners destroyed the shrubs to make way for crops, but by destroying the vegetation they increased soil erosion because when it rains the soil is washed away.

**Khorram Baameri:** The situation was much better before the Department of Environment started protecting the land. Once they started protecting it everything went downhill.

**Reza Derakhshani:** The government gives us chemical fertilisers to spread on the rangelands to improve vegetation.

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** There are other effects, for instance they have planted cotton throughout Garmsar and this has attracted pests which are damaging the rangelands and the cotton fields.

**Mohammad Rahim Ishani:** In our region [in the province of Turkmenistan] we have always relied on the forests, but they have also deteriorated over the past few decades. The forests have been destroyed by people — especially influential people, by the government, by factories. The trees have been chopped for the wood.

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** What the government didn't understand is that pastoralists and their herds care for the rangelands and help keep them in good

condition. It is grazing by animals – especially sheep – that keeps the rangelands healthy. Since we have been kept off the land, the plants that used to grow on the rangelands now no longer appear. Now we have to hand feed our herds for about 8 months of the year. They only have enough to eat from the rangelands for about 4 months per year.

**Maryam Rahmanian:** Most people, including policy-makers, believe that pastoralists and their herds are the *cause* of environmental degradation and should be kept off the land.

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** This is simply not true. The sheep help conserve the rangeland vegetation, they help propagate the plants. Without the sheep the seeds would be blown away by the wind and end up in the rocks. Why don't the experts come and see for themselves?

**Ali Gholami:** Why don't the experts compare the areas that have been under government protection with those that have not? The unprotected areas - the areas where sheep are allowed to go – have much more vegetation. In the old days we use to manage our rangelands in such a way that they could be used sustainably. We didn't need anyone to tell us what to do. If we are doing something wrong, then the Department of Environment should tell us what it is with logic and reason – they should prove it to us. We are logical people.

**Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht:** These experts who are so educated don't have our experience – nowhere near it. 

Participant name	Domestic animals kept
Tarrahom Jahedi	sheep, camel, cow
Allay Yaar Ataie	sheep (Zandi or Siah-Kabood)
Ali Asadzadeh	sheep (Moghan), two-humped camel (Boghoor)
Haj Iltafat Asadzadeh	sheep (Moghan), two-humped camel (Boghoor)
Reza Derakhshani	sheep (Sangesar)
Mostafa Parvizi	sheep (Bakhtiari)
Ghassem Parvizi	sheep (Bakhtiari)
Haji Najaf Ali Nikseresht	sheep (originally called Kharevarami, now Garmsar)
Abbas Ali Bana-ian	sheep (related to Sangesari)
Mohammad Rahim Ishani	Turkmen horse, cow, sheep, chicken
Aras Mohammad Shirmohammadli	Turkmen horse, camel (one-humped), sheep (Atabaaay)
Khorram Baameri	camel (Joosy Jammaazeh, one humped), sheep, cow
Shirzad Moosafoor Siahjel	sheep (Rai'ini)
Habibollah Yarrumtaghli Niazi	sheep, horse, donkey, ass, goats, chickens
Haj Hossein Asghari	sheep (Siah-e Zandi)
Abolghassem Sabah	sheep (Siah Kaboot or Zandi)
Ali Gholami	sheep (Kalmor/Kalhor)
Buyuk Nobakht	cow (Sarab)

Present, but not included in the table: Mohammad Yahyaiae, Mohammad Nabi Seyfi, Ali Mohammad Noorekeh, Reza Hashmi

