

# Wildfire: The Tibetan Fur Burning Campaign

## SUMMARY

After an appeal by the Dalai Lama in January 2006 to stop using furs from endangered animals, Tibetans across Tibet burned their valuable pelts in dramatic, unified actions that authorities were powerless to stop. Those involved tried to avoid politicizing the campaign, basing arguments to give up furs and animal skins on Buddhist ethical principles and Chinese environmental laws, rather than on the Dalai Lama's appeal.

The Tibetan use of fur in clothing dates back a long time, but it grew quickly in popularity when Chinese authorities began encouraging it in the 1990s. The 2006 campaign presented Chinese authorities with a dilemma: stand back and look weak as Tibetans rallied around the Dalai Lama's call, or punish them for giving up furs that were illegal in the first place?

In the end, Chinese authorities detained some individuals involved and tried to stop some of the bonfire events. Later, they even urged—and sometimes forced—Tibetans to wear furs at public events. However, Tibetans largely controlled the outcome of the fur burning campaign because it didn't depend on a concession from a power holder such as a Chinese official or a company boss.

What started as individual actions in certain towns or villages formed a powerful demonstration of Tibetans' collective strength, their commitment to wildlife protection, and allegiance to the Dalai Lama. The fur burning actions also showed that Tibetans in different areas shared the same values, building a sense of unity and power.

Quote from one of the organizers:

*"...We had this very happy situation that the Dalai Lama had made this strong statement and that happened to endorse what we always wanted to do, eradicate this decadent attitude towards wildlife which had come up fairly recently. At the same time, by putting his words into practice, we could show him our reverence, thank him that he is still here for us, pay our debt to him and show our thankfulness and everyone could see that, and for doing so we did not even have to transgress Chinese laws, but in fact, just apply them!"*

<b>ISSUE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fashion of wearing fur leading to deaths of endangered animals</li><li>• Allegiance to the Dalai Lama</li></ul>
<b>WHO</b>	Tibetans in Tibet

<b>WHERE</b>	Across Tibet, but especially Amdo and Kham
<b>GOALS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To save endangered animals</li> <li>• To show Tibetan loyalty to the Dalai Lama</li> </ul>
<b>STRATEGY</b>	Organizers made broad appeals to all Tibetans to stop wearing endangered animal skins and to give up their rare furs and pelts by burning them publicly. In order to avoid provoking Chinese authorities, the organizers couched their arguments in non-political terms—citing animal protection, Buddhist ethics, Chinese law, and economic interests. Organizers avoided direct reference to the Dalai Lama’s appeal.
<b>PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?</b>	Rejection of furs through public fur burning events were planned at a local level and spread to other areas, but they were not coordinated between different towns and villages by any single authority. A similar pattern in how the events took place suggests that communities learned from each other and copied what they saw other places doing. There was a convergence of preexisting desire by some environmentalists to eradicate fur clothing and the Dalai Lama’s appeal against wearing fur, creating a rare opportunity for action.
<b>How did they organize? How did they get started?</b>	It often began with individuals making appeals to give up the use of furs. They would display their own pelts and make a public vow to burn them, and then others joined in.
<b>ISSUE FRAMING</b>	<p>When appealing to Tibetans to stop wearing furs and skins of endangered animals, organizers framed the issue in terms of Buddhist ethics (e.g., that it’s morally wrong to kill animals for vanity), as well as ideas of environmental conservation, Chinese laws on wildlife protection, and economic reasoning (e.g., the price of the rare furs was too high). They did not directly quote the Dalai Lama’s appeal even though everyone knew that was the underlying motivation.</p> <p>One organizer described the delicate balance they tried to strike:</p> <p><i>“After this incredible success, we must take great care!... If we...dwell too much on why people were so enthusiastic at once about wildlife preservation, then we might lose the benefits...The government have [sic] had to accept what happened, but they could react very negatively if we behave insensitively now.”</i></p>
<b>LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES</b>	There was a very high level of participation from members of many different communities and backgrounds. Participation likely varied from place to place. A first-person account said that organizers from one region were mostly university graduates educated in China who had returned to Tibet. In some places,

<b>INCLUDING ELITES</b>	<p>monks avoided taking part directly, probably in an attempt to keep the fur burnings less politicized. However, in other areas, monks helped lead the campaign in their communities.</p>
<b>TARGET</b>	<p>On this issue, Tibetans could achieve their goals without a concession from a power holder, so the campaign didn't aim at a specific target.</p>
<b>OPPONENT(S)</b>	<p>Local Chinese authorities</p>
<b>TACTICS</b>  <b>Low-risk or high-risk? Dispersed or concentrated?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizers stopped wearing pelts and urged others to reject them too.</li> <li>• They proclaimed their intention to burn the furs publicly and urged others to do so as well.</li> <li>• Sometimes pelts hung on lines in the village for days as people added theirs to the line.</li> <li>• A date was set and a bonfire set up in advance. People gathered for the bonfires, threw their pelts on the flames, and often cheered "<i>kyi kyi so so lha rgyal lo</i>" and said prayers as they burned.</li> <li>• Giving up fur clothing was a low-risk, dispersed action.</li> <li>• Organizing people to reject fur-wearing was a high risk action because it involved collective mobilization, an act viewed with suspicion by the state.</li> <li>• Burning furs was a concentrated action, as people were gathered together, but involved medium risk because it wasn't overtly political and it technically complied with Chinese laws.</li> </ul>
<b>RESPONSE BY OPPONENT</b>	<p>The Chinese authorities (e.g., local governments and police) began to oppose the fur burning events because they realized that they were powerful demonstrations of loyalty to the Dalai Lama, in addition to their meaning for wildlife protection. In some communities, authorities arrested organizers, tried to stop the public bonfires, and later, even urged—or sometimes forced—Tibetans to wear furs at public events.</p>
<b>MEDIA &amp; MESSAGING</b>  <b>Did they have a clear message? What was it? Did they reach out to media?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The organizers used a clear message to appeal to others to join them in rejecting fur clothing: "Stop Wearing Fur."</li> <li>• Some Tibetans reached out to the media, taking videos and sending reports to contacts outside Tibet</li> <li>• The main message communicated to journalists was that Tibetans were destroying their valuable animal skins to show their commitment to wildlife protection and to the wishes of the Dalai Lama.</li> </ul>

**Was there media coverage? If so, what role did this play?**

- There was some coverage by both Tibetan and western media.
- Coverage may have helped the campaign spread, but otherwise did not have a big influence on it.

## OUTCOMES

- The Tibetan practice of wearing pelts of endangered animals dramatically decreased.
  - Numbers of some endangered animals (such as tigers in India, the supply source) have begun to increase after steadily dropping before.
  - Tibetans across Tibet demonstrated their allegiance to the Dalai Lama by following his wishes.
  - The campaign demonstrated that Tibetans in different areas held the same values and approach to issues, building a sense of unity and power that likely impacted actions in future years.
  - The power of local Chinese authorities was reduced: the authorities who normally control almost every aspect of Tibetan life were—and still are—almost powerless to combat the campaign.
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