



IYRP guidance on terminology

On 15 March 2022, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2026 the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP). The IYRP aims to create awareness on the valuable role that rangelands play in providing diverse and valuable ecosystem services, including food security to global citizens and carbon sequestration, among others. The IYRP will also highlight the crucial role that pastoralists play in shaping and conserving rangelands, including their unique biodiversity and habitats.

The terms 'rangelands' and 'pastoralists' are widely used but imperfectly defined in international discourse. The terms have several different meanings or connotations in the English language and may not be the favoured term in some locations or contexts. Alternative terms can be culturally specific to a location, while the terms 'rangelands' and 'pastoralists' may be unpopular in some places because they are associated with unwelcome stereotypes or policies. These definitional challenges are amplified when terms are translated into other languages.

This document has been developed to support more consistent use of these terms in IYRP-related activities and publications. The document explains how the terms have been used by countries and other actors in calling for the International Year. It does not propose a definitive definition, although it may contribute towards greater consistency in the use of terms. To help improve understanding and communication, this document explains how the terms are currently used within the IYRP alliance.

Rangelands

In Mongolia's submission to the United Nations calling for the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists, rangelands are described as "lands on which the indigenous vegetation is predominantly grasses, forbs or shrubs that are or can be grazed, and which are used as a natural ecosystem for raising grazing livestock and wildlife". Mongolia states that rangelands may include "native grasslands, savannas, shrublands, pasturelands, woodlands, wetlands, deserts, steppes, pampa, llanos, cerrado, campos, veld, tundra, alpine communities and marshes". This definition is based on that developed by Allen et al. in 2011* for the International Rangeland Congress.

The [Rangelands Atlas](#) describes rangelands as "areas of grasses, grass-like plants, forbs, shrubs and sometimes trees that are grazed or have the potential to be grazed by livestock

* Allen VG, Batello C, Berreta EJ, Hodgson J, Kothmann M, Li X, McIvor J, Milne J, Morris C, Peeters A, Sanderson M. 2011. An international terminology for grazing lands and grazing animals. *Grass and Forage Science* 66: 2–28.

and wildlife.” The global map of rangelands includes seven biomes or rangeland types: deserts and xeric shrublands (35%), tropical and subtropical grasslands, savannas and shrublands (26%), temperate grasslands, savannas and shrublands (13%), tundra (15%), montane grasslands and shrublands (6%), mediterranean forests, woodlands and scrub (4%) and flooded grasslands and savannas (1%). In total, rangelands cover 54% of the global terrestrial surface or 79,509,421 km².

Many terms are used instead of rangelands, including terms such as grazing lands and pasturelands, which have a related, if not identical, meaning. This diversity of terms can be examined more closely in this [word cloud](#).

Pastoralists

Mongolia’s submission to the United Nations calling for the IYRP states that the health and productivity of rangelands are “directly critical to the livelihoods and cultures of more than 500 million pastoralists around the world, many of whom are indigenous peoples”.

Pastoralists are described as “people who raise livestock or semi-domesticated animals on rangelands, including ranchers, nomads and transhumant herders”.

Mongolia also notes that pastoralists include “nomads and transhumant herders” and underlines the importance of mobility as a feature of pastoralism. The [United Nations Environment Assembly 2019](#) notes that pastoralism is “linked to the diverse cultures, identities, traditional knowledge, historical experience of coexistence with nature, and distinct way of life of indigenous peoples and local communities”.

The IYRP note “[Information for pastoralist organisations](#)” states that pastoralists are “people who raise livestock as their primary source of living on plants that grow naturally, often on areas called rangelands and grasslands”. A pastoralist organisation is defined as “a group of pastoralists who act together to improve the lives of the members, for example, by facilitating their access to information and markets and by advocating for pastoralists’ rights. The organisation may be registered (formal) or not (informal)”. A distinction is made between

i) pastoralist support organisations, which support pastoralists in their development and advocacy; and ii) pastoralist organisations, which comprise people who practise pastoralism.

Livestock mobility is a key feature of pastoralism and is critical for sustainable rangeland management. The pastoralists may be highly mobile or fully sedentary or anywhere in between, depending on location and context, but their land-use systems are always extensive. A wide range of comparable or related terms for pastoralists are used in different countries, as can be seen in this [word cloud](#).