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'Himalayan Viagra' facing manmade threats, warns researcher

IANS | Dehradun
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Unscientific harvesting of the caterpillar fungus, one of the world's highest-priced biological commodities and globally dubbed the "Himalayan Viagra", may lead to the extinction of the species in India, warns a researcher. He favours tough regulation as its trade has a vast black market, especially in [China](#).

"The caterpillar fungus is the new-found natural commodity for the communities who live in the Himalayan region. In the Indian Himalayas, many of the harvesters do not even know its medicinal use and they only harvest it owing to its high economic value," researcher Pramod Yadav, who is based here in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, told IANS.

He said the lure of easy money from its trade has resulted into enormous ecological threats to the species, leading to its sharp decline in its natural habitat.

There is even the establishment of an informal trade regime -- like Himalayan gold rush -- in the region, he said.

Trade insiders say a single caterpillar fungus sells in [India](#) for about \$4 to \$7, depending on the health and size of the fungus, while traders sell it to wholesalers or exporters for \$12,000 to \$18,000 a kg.

It's much sought after in [China](#) for its medicinal and aphrodisiac qualities.

In India, the caterpillar fungus grows in the high meadows of Kanchandzanga Biosphere Reserve in Sikkim, Dehan-Debang Biosphere Reserve in Arunachal Pradesh and Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve and Askot Wildlife Sanctuary, both are in Uttarakhand adjoining Tibet in [China](#).

It appears above the ground just as the snow melts in May or June. Some people are able to collect 30 in a single day, others not even a single one for days together.

Its collection is a difficult business as it involves the risk of illness.

Besides, competition often turns into clashes among the collectors.

"During my field visits, villagers appeared worried about the decreasing production of caterpillar fungus, resulting in increasing conflict among local communities year by year," Yadav said.

He said even the locals, whose primary livelihood is subsistence farming, are aware of the fact that unscientific over-exploitation is leading to its depletion.

The huge human pressure during the collection season is affecting the fragile mountain ecosystem, situated between 3,000 and 4,500 metres above sea level.

Yadav's work is supported by the Future Conservationist Award of Conservation Leadership Programme, a partnership programme of Birdlife International, Fauna and Flora International and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). It has also been supported by the Rufford Small Grant and Idea Wild Grant.

In Uttarakhand, thousands of villagers, most of them belonging to the Bhotiya tribe, go for the mass collection of caterpillar fungus, locally known as Keera Jadi, that is worth its weight in gold, carrying with them tents, food and domestic animals.

During the collection period, threats like overgrazing, logging of trees, non-degradable garbage and increased human activity in the Alpine pastures may have a deleterious effect on caterpillar fungus and native biodiversity.

The "Himalayan Viagra" is literally transforming local economies.

During the study, Yadav noted that the income of the locals involved in the fungus trade has grown tremendously. They are spending their additional income on children's education, family healthcare and subsistence needs.

"Now, we do not have to rely completely on agriculture, which is subject to rainfall and wildlife demolition," the study quoted 36-year-old villager Prem Sing Rana, who also banks on harvesting the caterpillar fungus, as saying.

According to a Nepal Rastra Bank report last year, about 83-183 tonnes of caterpillar fungus is collected globally, generating revenue of \$5-11 billion per year.

Yadav's work primarily focuses in the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve -- a World Heritage Site -- and Askot Wildlife Sanctuary in Uttarakhand.

The Uttarakhand government has set certain guidelines for the collection and trade of caterpillar fungus through village-level forest councils. However, its commercial exploitation from the wildlife sanctuaries and national parks is completely prohibited.

"Currently, there is no management practice to mitigate or reduce generated garbage during stay of the harvesters, which may cause ecological threats in the alpine meadows that are prone to climatic vulnerability," Yadav said.

There is also need to educate the harvesters about conservation and sustainability of the caterpillar fungus in the landscape, he added.

Yadav favours the regulation of the rampant exploitation and implementation of scientific, sustainable harvesting of the caterpillar fungus.

"There is also a need to take integrated initiatives by its range countries like Bhutan, China, [India](#) and Nepal for conservation, sustainable harvesting and trade of the fungus," he added.

(Vishal Gulati is an Internews' Earth Journalism Network Biodiversity Fellow. He can be reached at vishal.g@ians.in)

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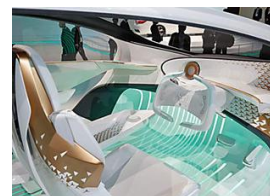
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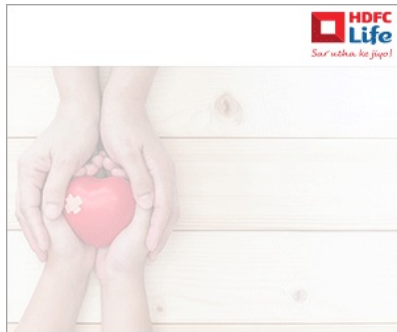


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