

Gold rush for Nepal's 'Himalayan Viagra'

Nepalese trade in a libido-boosting fungus is booming but experts warn over-exploitation could destroy ecosystem.

by Angel L. Martinez Cantera



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For more than 500 years, yarsagumba has been coveted in the Asiatic market [Angel L. Martinez/ Al Jazeera]

Siwang, Nepal - An \$11bn gold rush is under way in the remote highlands of Nepal to exploit the world's most valuable fungus famed for its aphrodisiac and medicinal properties.

Trade in yarsagumba - dubbed the "Himalayan Viagra" for its supposed libido-boosting powers - has boomed since the end of a ban opened up the Chinese market where it is highly prized.

Yet researchers now warn that uncontrolled collection of the unique species could trigger devastating changes in the fragile mountain ecosystem and destroy the local economy.

Harvest season

At 2,500 metres above sea level and two days' trek from the nearest town with paved roads, the normally sleepy mountain hamlet of Siwang is shaken by hectic activity.

Porters load belongings into their *doka* - Nepalese wicker baskets traditionally carried on the forehead - and entire families prepare for the harvest season.

"I go with my brother, wife and children - the children are more likely to find yarsagumba because they have better sight and nimble fingers to search for it," says villager Ganesh Pun, 38.

"Only little children and old people who can't see or move very well remain in the village."

Like Pun, half of the residents of the hamlet will climb to 4,000 meters in the search for yarsagumba, which is native to the meadows of Nepal, India, Bhutan and the Tibetan plateau at up to 5,000 metres above sea level.

For more than 500 years, this exotic specimen has been coveted in the Asiatic market due to its aphrodisiac and medicinal properties.

"*Ophiocordyceps sinensis* [its scientific name] is an important nourishing tonic," explains Jit Narajan Sah, assistant professor at the [Institute of Forestry of Tribhuvan University](#).

"It regulates the normal functioning of various part of the body and strengthens the immune and circulatory system.

"It has traditionally been used for impotence, backache and to increase sperm and blood production."

Fungal spores colonise larvae that live in the soil during summer rains and, after mummifying them over winter, a mushroom grows from each caterpillar's head to emerge from the soil.

The fungus is then harvested before the monsoon season, between May and June, when tens of thousands of tents invade the vast plateau in Rukum and Dolpa, which becomes home to 60,000 harvesters and generates 40 percent of the country's yarsagumba yield.

The power to boost the libido attributed to the fungus has made it highly prized in the Chinese market and it has become a key source of income for poor Nepalese villages.

"Yarsagumba is very mysterious. Some could search for it in a square metre and won't find it," says Dham Bahadour Gorbuga, 45, also from Siwang.

"Sometimes, we can't collect a single one in a working week, but some other times we're able to get 50 of them on the same day."

Gorbuga describes the difficulties of harvesting at high altitude: "The path is very narrow and steep, the weather conditions are terrible: we suffer from altitude sickness, fatigue and dizziness.

"But it's only for a couple of weeks and this money help us support our families."

Price differential

Siwang villagers have organised their own committee to coordinate the harvest and control access to the fields, which establishes annual quotas and charges collectors an entry fee.

Raj Kumar Pun, a trader in the neighbouring village of Maikut, said entry fees have been increasing every year, and traders also have to pay government royalties.

"Back in the 90s, the price for a piece of yarsagumba was only a rupee or two, as my father used to sell it," he said.

The exotic species made no official contribution to Nepal's economy until 2001 because its collection,



use and sale was [banned by the government](#).

But once the ban was lifted, the boom began and trade in the "Himalayan Viagra", mostly in unprocessed form, increased exponentially.

The government now earns substantial revenue of about 5.1 million rupees from the trade, according to [the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development \(ICIMOD\)](#).

Yet a huge price differential exists between the local and international market meaning those who gather the fungus earn only a small share from the trade.

Half of Siwang dwellers climb up to 4,000 metres on the search for the caterpillar fungus [Angel L Martinez/ Al Jazeera]

A middle man in Siwang buys the harvest for 1.7 million rupees (\$18,000) per kilo and sells it for up to 3 million rupees (\$31,600) in Nepal's capital Kathmandu, but by the time the yarsagumba reaches Shanghai, it can fetch as much as \$100 per gramme.

Over-exploitation

Scientists are also warning about over-exploitation of this resource as the market for it has boomed.

A study published last year in the magazine *Biological Conservation* suggested China's rapid economic growth has increased the value of yarsagumba's global market to between \$5bn and \$11bn per year.

However, scientific research reported by [Nature](#) magazine reveals that alongside the growing trade in yarsagumba, the harvest has decreased in recent years.

Researchers link this decline to the lack of regulations governing what is harvested and warn that without controls the yarsagumba boom could end by triggering devastating changes in the fragile mountain ecosystem.

The absence of regulation not only allows over-harvesting but is also reinforcing the inequalities among those profiting from this trade

Ragu Chitra, a herb trader from Kathmandu, described problems that exist in a black market for the fungus.

"A trader had yarsagumba worth 5 million rupees stolen last year when a gang went to his place pretending to be police," Chitra said. "He had to give it all because he didn't have a licence."

Robbery and crimes related to the trade in the coveted fungus have made headlines, and in 2011 [a Nepalese court condemned six men to life sentences for murdering harvesters](#).

Collecting at high altitudes can also be hazardous - four children from Siwang School have become orphans after the harvest season.

The school will be closed during harvesting as half of its children trek with their families to the *buki* or Himalayan pastures.

Siwang's villagers will continue to harvest at more than 4,000 meters, aware that there is a fine line between luck

and misfortune.

But the hunt for this natural treasure does not deter many - Gorbuga is now in his tenth year searching for the world's most valuable fungus.

"The mountain is unforgiving - a villager died because a block of ice struck him and swiped him away," he said. "I was there when everything happened and we couldn't ever find him."

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