

Mushrooms, flowers and herbs: income opportunities for rural communities in Kham

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Tibetans have been harvesting herbs, mushrooms and animal parts as a source of income for centuries. Most of the materials were collected for sale for the Chinese medicine market. However, the impact of globalization is affecting the most remote places in Tibet, ie rare wildflowers being harvested and sold on the international market by Chinese companies through the internet.

The herb and mushroom trade is constantly growing. Local Tibetans profit considerably from open access to these resources. However, unsustainable use is undermining long term benefits. Households don't receive the necessary support to organize themselves in order to achieve a more powerful position in selling their harvest and receive no training that would guarantee high quality of products and ensure sustainable harvest rates. Substantial profit remains with a few middlemen and companies in the Chinese lowlands.

One of the most important 'plants' is Yartsa Gunbu (dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu), caterpillar fungus (*Cordyceps sinensis*), which parasites on a butterfly larvae in grasslands. Since 1988 matsutake mushroom (*Tricholoma matsutake*) has been harvested, generating substantial income for rural households in Kham. In Dechen, unsustainable harvest techniques have reduced the output substantially in recent years.

Tibetan communities benefit substantially from assistance in how to manage their resources sustainably. Also households benefit from support in developing and diversifying natural resource based income opportunities, which also help to protect the environment. Introduction of sustainable harvesting techniques, efficient solar drying, and clean storage of mushrooms and herbs, as well as support in packaging and marketing are important factors. In addition, cultivation of medicinal, aromatic and horticultural plants would transfer knowledge, generate new sustainable income sources for rural communities, and reduce pressure on wild populations.