

Livelihoods and Conservation of Medicinal Plants: Will it Work in Mountains?

By Archana Godbole

Medicinal plants are important commodities that have been exploited for the betterment of the human race throughout the world. India with its ancient medicinal systems like Ayurveda and other indigenous systems like Unani, Siddha and Amchi is well known for the use of medicinal plants since time immemorial. The Himalayas are a treasure trove due to various ecosystems and diverse habitats.

Medicinal plants collection has been an equally old livelihood activity of communities in remote mountainous areas. Medicinal plants are contributing to the major trade undertaken in the Chamoli district in the state of Uttaranchal.

However the medicinal plant sector is unorganized. The benefits of collection from the wild are not reaching the poor. Due to urbanization and pressure on ecosystems like *Bugiyals*; the high altitude medicinal plants are depleting and many of them have been already listed in the IUCN Red Data Book as endangered. There is a need for awareness and capacity building among local people and various other stakeholder groups involved in the medicinal plants sector in the Himalayas for the long term survival of this important plant resource.



Farmers from Ghese in their Picrorrhiza kurrooa field (Archana Godbole)

Medicinal plants from Himalayas

The Himalayan region is particularly well endowed with medicinal plant species. This is largely because of the diverse agro-climatic conditions which exist in the region. These vary from dry deciduous forests and alpine meadows in the north-west, to rain forests in the north-east.

A large number of people in the Himalayan region derive employment and income from the collection, processing and trade of the plants. Unfortunately, the increase in demand has also increased the threat of depletion from wild. With this background it is clear there needs to be interventions that involve local communities from the Himalayan region in the sustainable development of the otherwise unorganized, underdeveloped medicinal plants sector.

The problems of this unorganized sector of medicinal plants are many, but the most important problems are that of awareness, synergy, institutional understanding and the need to search for workable options to resolve these issues.

Sustainable harvesting is increasingly being seen as the most important conservation strategy for most wild-harvested species and their habitats, given their current and potential contributions to local economies and their great value to harvesters over the long term. The basic idea is that non-destructive harvests and local benefits will maintain populations, species and ecosystem diversity.

Besides poverty and the disintegration of traditional restrictions, the major challenges for sustainable wild-collection include lack of knowledge about sustainable harvest practices, undefined land use rights and lack of legislative and policy guidance.

The Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF) has been engaged in a project '*Capacity building for linking medicinal plants conservation and sustainable livelihoods in Western Himalayas, India*' since July 2006 with financial support from Plant Life International UK through their Plant Conservation and Livelihoods Initiative under the Allachy Award Medicinal Plants Conservation Programme.

This one year intervention has been designed for raising awareness levels to motivate communities, to develop sustainable harvesting methods for medicinal plants collected from the wild and to familiarize local communities with the medicinal plants market and provide authentic information about the present status of medicinal plants in wild. There is a need build the capacity of local people for using the medicinal plants sustainably. The AERF has worked with local communities through information sharing, awareness generation, focus group discussions and trainings in high altitude villages from Chamoli district of Uttarakhand from India .

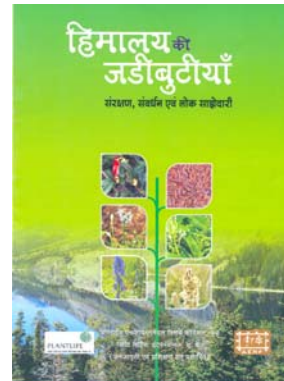
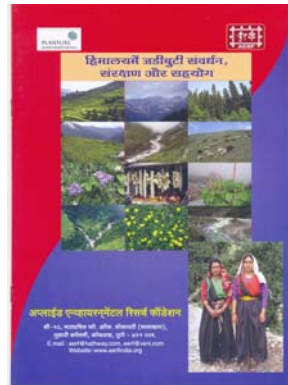
There are many challenges to improving the well-being of people who depend on medicinal plants from the forests and high altitude meadows of Himalayan region.

These include:

- 1) Expanding natural resource based employment and income opportunities;
- 2) Finding ways to monitor and arrest the resource depletion from negatively affecting livelihoods;
- 3) Identifying conservation strategies that favour livelihoods while achieving conservation.

This one year intervention has made the following significant impacts:

- Awareness about medicinal plants sector in terms of conservation has increased among the communities and other stakeholders like small traders, NGO personnel and Government agencies.



Dissemination brochures for communities in local language Hindi

- Dissemination material in the form of posters, brochures, etc. has been prepared and used by local people. The project has helped to provide information on medicinal plants in Hindi.
- Local people's capacity to respond to markets and share the concerns has increased in the project villages in Ghat & Dewal Blocks from Chamoli district.
- Basis for developing medicinal plants-based livelihoods has formed and communities are now looking for more precise facilitation and support for developing medicinal plants based livelihoods.
- Through stakeholders workshops the stakeholders are involved in the process and are ready to participate in the further interventions.
- Training on medicinal plants conservation needs, its livelihood perspective and sustainable harvesting has helped increasing awareness about the in situ conservation of endangered medicinal plants.
- The project has provided an opportunity to far reaching villages from the interior areas to initiate NRM based livelihood activities and support .

Reference

A detailed report of the stakeholders' workshop is available at:

<http://www.plantlife.org.uk/international/assets/med-plants/projects-case-studies/AERF%20project/AERF-workshop-28-29-Apr-07.pdf>

Dr Archana Godbole (archanagodbole64@gmail.com) has a background in botany and the environment. She is an honorary director at the Applied Environmental Research Foundation where she is involved in project preparation, execution planning and management of research, monitoring and evaluation of work, team-leading and writing research papers and reports.

Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF) has been engaged in community based conservation work for more than a decade in India. AERF is a registered non-government organization that undertakes research and implementation projects in the Western Ghats in western India and the Indian Himalayas. Although AERF's focus is on community based conservation and natural resource management, the Foundation has been able to develop projects and expertise broadly falling into four themes: 1) Biodiversity Conservation 2) Conservation and Livelihoods 3) Renewable Energy 4) Indigenous Knowledge and Natural Resource Management.

AERF believes that community empowerment, participation and action is the key towards biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. AERF is committed to research and action-implementation projects to achieve a balance between conservation and development. AERF believes in establishing a link between research and its effective use in the processes of development for poverty alleviation, sustainable resource use and participatory conservation.

More information about the project can be obtained from:



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