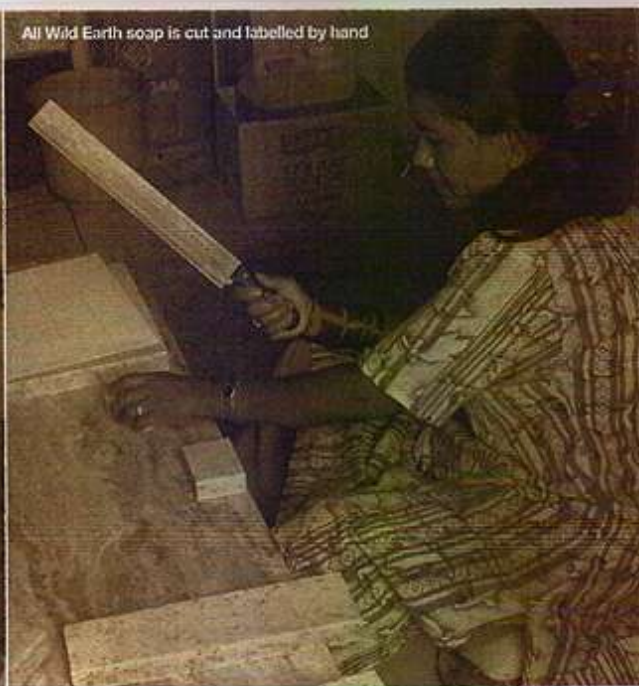


The soap is poured into a mould where it will cure for at least one month



All Wild Earth soap is cut and labelled by hand

Himalayan healing

IN THE DEPTHS OF NEPAL, A GROUP OF WOMEN HAVE PULLED TOGETHER TO PRESERVE THEIR HIMALAYAN HERITAGE AND TO BOOST THE FINANCES OF THEIR ISOLATED COMMUNITIES. THE RESULT IS WILD EARTH. CAROLYNNE KNOWLING SPOKE TO FOUNDER CARROLL DUNHAM

Amongst the labyrinth of Kathmandu's bustling back streets, deep in the heart of the northern Asian capital, is Wild Earth, a small cooperative of local women using local produce to create handcrafted Himalayan herbal products.

Wild Earth was founded by Carroll Dunham, an entrepreneurial anthropologist who has lived in the Himalayas for the last twenty years. Bizarre though it may sound, Carroll came up with the idea for Wild Earth while researching polyandry - when a woman marries all the brothers in a family - for a film for National Geographic.

"Once I'd written my book, *Hidden Himalayas*, and finished the film, I asked the local women how I could contribute back to them. They told me income generation would have the greatest benefit for their communities," says Carroll.

Studies show that when cash is directly given to women, the whole

family benefits as funds are used for food, clothing, education and health.

"Having spent years gossiping with the women about love, sex, pregnancy and birth, I was fascinated by the women's stories of herbal healing. So I began studying ayurveda and Tibetan medicine and Wild Earth was born," says Carroll.

Wild Earth is based on the core values of free trade and sustainability, with the aim of routing as much money as possible back into rural communities and directly into the hands of the women.

Wild Earth produces a vast range of products, using native herbs and flowers and traditional Himalayan recipes.

"Unfortunately, in the Indian Himalayas, Indian herbal companies have unscrupulously gone in and hired locals with little thought about sustainability, stripping whole mountain-sides bare of precious herbs," says Carroll. "Local communities were notified by traders about the most popular herbs, which



have started pouring out of the mountains in huge quantities on dangerously over-loaded charter planes. Most head for the border town of Nepalgunj, where the herbs are smuggled over the border to India, processed and sold for 12 times the original price.

"I wanted to see if I could create simple products that unskilled women could hand-make and which would benefit the rural communities."

Wild Earth obtains its raw materials from a variety of sources, but mostly from remote, economically fragile mountain communities. Some of the herbs are grown by Wild Earth themselves, some come from community forests and others from village farming cooperatives. Cardamon is obtained from a local monastery. By purchasing at source wherever possible, the harvesters (women are the main herb-gatherers in Nepal) receive maximum income for their raw materials.

Carroll's company also works with the Mountain Institute, an organisation that helps train communities in how to preserve and sustain their natural resources.

The Himalayas are a veritable treasure trove of rich, pungent plants and many, like the Himalayan Blue Poppy, are rare and cannot be sustainably harvested. Others, like the forest-grown herbs, must be harvested without damaging the root structure in order that they will return the following year.

The altitude of the Himalayas helps to produce particularly pungent plants, such as the Spikenard used in Wild Earth's Tibetan Hot Springs Spikenard soap, which only grows above 8,000 feet.

"The biggest challenge is managing the arrival of more sophisticated processing machinery," says Carroll. "Improved technology means greater income for the community, but not necessarily for the women who don't always have the skills necessary to run the machines. So we try to continue with simple, handcrafted items, such as smudge sticks and hand-painted boxes, that women can make with their hands and continue to provide their families with support."

Back in Kathmandu, the Wild Earth kitchen is at the heart of the operation.

"We're just witches cooking up brews," says Carroll. "We have our most creative ideas when we play here in our kitchen."

Carroll and Laikhu Lama, otherwise known as 'Jorabhudi Rani', the herbal queen, work here together to create the soaps and sachets and pillows and massage oils that are then sold throughout the world.

"Sometimes we follow old ayurvedic or Tibetan recipes, sometimes we adapt traditional Himalayan healing with modern bathcare products," explains Carol.

Upstairs from the kitchen lies the 'playroom', where the new products are developed and tested. Jars and bags of dried and fresh herbs and flowers are piled high, while bottles of precious essential oils line the walls like old alchemist's apothecary. The earthy aromas of mountain herbs like juniper and rhododendrum fuse with palmarose, lavender, lemongrass, sandalwood and bergamot.

The final products tell their own stories. Soaps, for example, are made using weed herbs gathered by displaced women from the Maoist conflict in Western Nepal.

Wild Earth also claims to be the only producer of fresh yak milk soap in the world.

Yak milk for soap is hand-carried down the mountain at top speed to reach Kathmandu before it spoils"

"The milk - actually, it should be 'nak' milk, yaks are male - is gathered in high pastures above 8,000 feet and literally hand-carried down the mountain at top speed so it reaches our workshop in Kathmandu before it spoils. Yak milk contains the highest fat content of any animal milk and therefore makes the richest emollient for the skin."

The ayurvedic soaps are blended for dry 'vata' skins, oily 'kapha' skins and sensitive 'pitta' skins. The herb 'amalaki' is often used in the soaps and is apparently the highest naturally existing form of vitamin C.

Other products include aromatic Passion and Dream pillows that have been chanted over by monks and 100% organic essential oils.

"I love challenges and riddles and the dynamism that occurs when ancient meets modern," enthuses Carroll. And with Wild Earth, it would seem, she's created the perfect mix.

None of Wild Earth's products are tested on animals. They can be purchased at www.wildearthnepal.com



Shobha Shrestha mixes vegetable oils and lye together with essential oils and natural botanicals to make a batch of Wild Earth soap