

supplier profile



Carroll Dunham (above left) with growers

Wild Earth

Based in Nepal, Wild Earth's handcrafted herbal products and spa treatments draw inspiration from 8th-century Himalayan healing traditions. We speak to founder Carroll Dunham about the business and her belief in sustainability and empowering local communities

Q How do you incorporate local traditions in your products?

A The recipes and treatments we use are based on the vast, unwritten, oral knowledge of Himalayan healers, especially midwives, whom I have studied as an anthropologist for almost 25 years. They take their lead from two major medical traditions here: sowa rigpa, practised by the people of the high northern Himalaya; and ayurveda, practised by people who migrated from the south. Some products are based

on ingredients used in sowa rigpa, the traditional Tibetan medicine system outlined in an 8th-century Buddhist text, the *Gyud-Zhi*. Other products are based on ayurvedic principles.

Q Where do you source your plants and oils?

A The majority of our herbs come from the Himalayas. This region is a vast storehouse of medicinal and aromatic plants due to the biodiverse microclimate

created by the mountains. I've studied here for many years, so these herbs are like a language for me. I am fluent in Tibetan and Nepalese, and I am fluent in these herbs – knowing where they grow, what their properties are and when they're in season. We also grow over 20 varieties of herbs. Our oils and spices come from all over the world as some aren't indigenous to Nepal.

Q What products do you have and how do you blend them?

A We have nine retail lines encompassing soaps, essential and massage oils, creams, shampoos, masks and herbal pillows and compresses. Jampeche, our spa line, comprises 26 products.

All of our products are handmade on site by Nepalese women under fair trade practices. We blend Nepalese oils, which consist of heavy, fragrant base notes, with Indian oils, comprising soft aromatic middle notes, as middle notes are preferred by the mass market.

Q What was the inspiration behind your spa treatments?

A The *Gyud-Zhi*, which translates as *The Four Tantras*, consists of four separate books of knowledge. One of the last sections is called Jampeche, which means 'gentle external treatments'. It details simple treatments utilising muds, salts, hot herbal baths and hot oil being practised in rural areas.

Working with two amchis [traditional sowa rigpa practitioners], Sherab Barma and Tsewang Ngudrup, and Joanna Claire, a 73-year-old Chinese acupuncturist and master massage therapist, we have revived

BACKGROUND BRIEFING

Carroll Dunham first went to Nepal in 1984 during her junior year at Princeton University. As an anthropologist, she spent many years in Humla, a north-western region of Nepal, studying fraternal polyandry – where one woman marries all the brothers in a household.

Helping the women in their daily routines, she learned about the herbal traditions they used. This resulted in a book and film for National Geographic in 1986 and 1993 respectively.

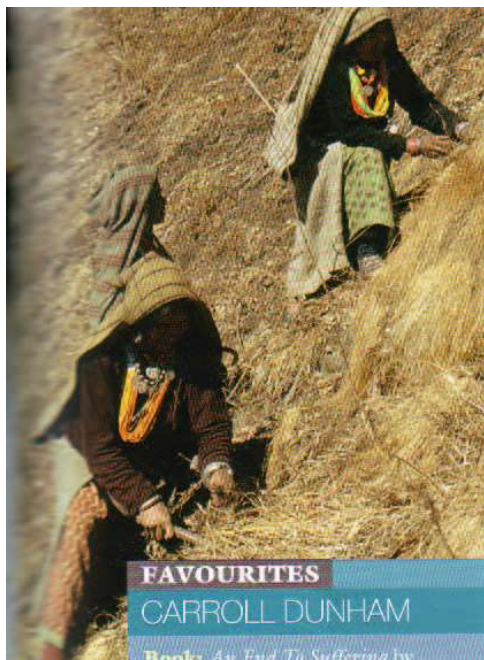
Her interest in ayurvedic and Tibetan medicine and Western herbalism grew. While working as an anthropologist for The Body Shop, she drew on this knowledge to create two ayurvedic-based skincare lines for the company.

"After gossiping with women for over 10 years about love and sex, I

had grown close to them and wanted to give something back to them," explains Dunham. "Their answer was simple: 'Help us make money.'"

"When developing the products for The Body Shop I made sure the raw materials were purchased directly from the communities in which they grew. I realised that the abundant Himalayan herbs could become a source of income by setting up a herbal products company that would support fair trade and sustainable harvesting. That's how Wild Earth was born."

She set up the company in 1999 in Tangal in Kathmandu, Nepal. As well as providing room for product manufacturing and student training, the site also has space, which is rented by local practitioners, to run a traditional Tibetan medical centre called the Lapis River Medical Clinic.



FAVOURITES

CARROLL DUNHAM

Book: *An End To Suffering* by Pankaj Mishra – it's a compelling story of a Buddha in modern times

Film: *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* by Byambasuren Davaa – I love obscure ethnographic films

Place: The wilderness

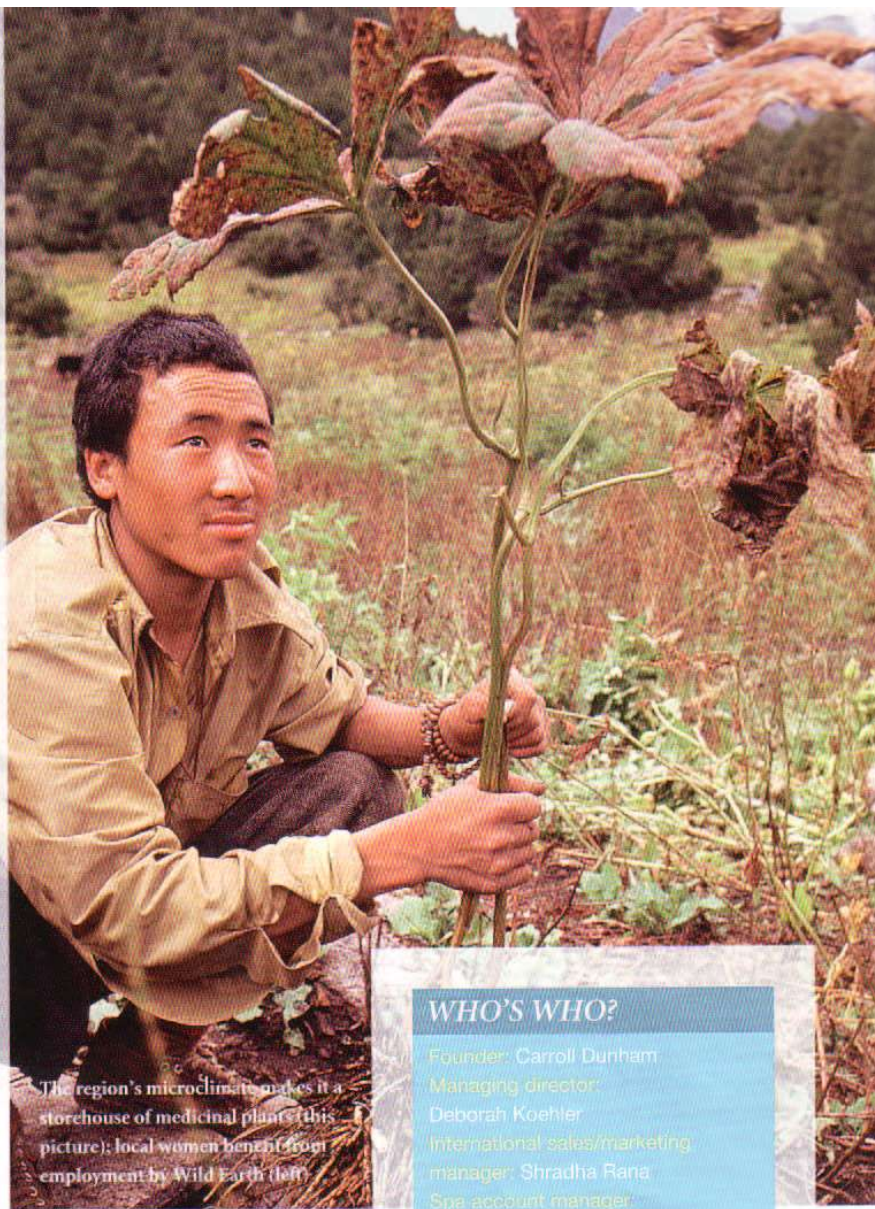
Leisure activity:

Walking in the mountains

Season: Autumn in Nepal

Spa: A secret hot spring in the Tibetan plateau

Spa treatment: A high-quality, intense foot treatment



The region's microclimate makes it a storehouse of medicinal plants (this picture): local women benefit from employment by Wild Earth (left)

and adapted several jampeche massage treatments to a modern spa client's needs.

Q Where and how do you teach your treatments?

A We have a massage therapy school, consisting of one room with five beds, at our headquarters in Tangal. Locals can receive student treatments here at a discounted price. We don't have official courses as we adapt training according to where our students will work; the massages we've devised for spas vary from operator to operator. However, we do want to formalise this and launch a Spa Academy in 2007. We've also set up a training initiative within Lo Kapan School, an amchi school in the remote Mustang region.

Q How would you sum up Wild Earth's philosophy?

A Innovation, authenticity, but mostly preservation. To help these Himalayan healing traditions survive the onslaught of modernity, we work with the Amchi Association and Ayurveda Association of Nepal to lobby government.

Q Why and how does Wild Earth support sustainability?

A The consumer demand for Himalayan herbs is high. In the Indian Himalayas the call for ayurvedic herbs and plants has already decimated some species. In the Tibetan plateau, the demand for wild sowa rigpa herbs is causing ecological concern. So far, we've been lucky because the roads are not good here. China is the biggest threat, with single factories exporting up to US\$42m (€33m or £22m) worth of herbs in just one year. And now its government has already built the first of five planned roads to the top northern edge of the Himalayas – the main objective being for herb extraction. Plants already endangered include kukti, used to treat liver and stomach problems, and costus, known for its health-enhancing qualities.

We're trying to raise funds for scientific research on harvesting techniques. The high-

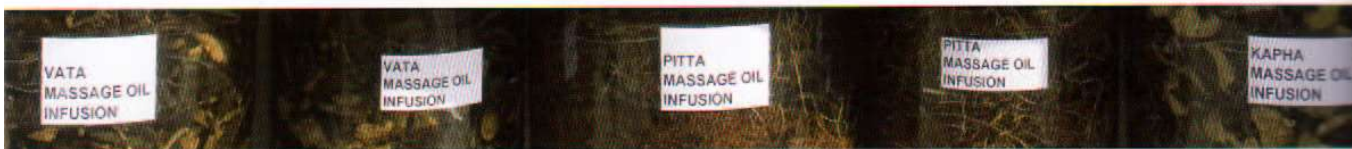
WHO'S WHO?

Founder: Carroll Dunham
Managing director: Deborah Koehler
International sales/marketing manager: Shradha Rana
Spa account manager: Bob Shrestha
Head trainer: Joanna Claire
Product development manager: Willow Larna
Retail store manager: Surabhi Acharya
Operations manager: Rajendra Singh
Soap production: Shobha Shrestha

PHOTO: T. SPINOLE/SOLICHA

altitude (8,000ft) plants grow in very fragile soil and we don't fully understand their reproductive cycles, how best to harvest them and in what quantity. We're working alongside non-government organisations and conservationists on this. We've also been working with The Mountain Institute – an organisation dedicated to preserving mountain environments.

We refuse to use plants that are endangered. This can be frustrating as there



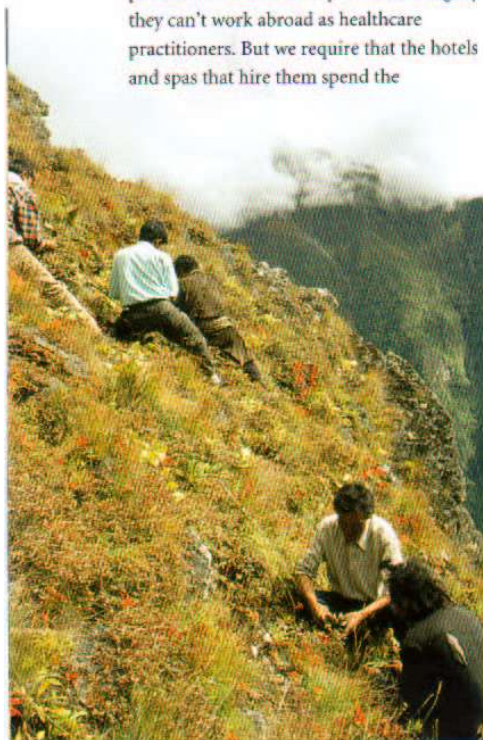
are some amazing plants that have fantastic properties, but if we know we can't sustain it then we have no interest in using it.

Q Why and how does Wild Earth support local communities?

A We estimate that 12 per cent of rural income in the Himalayas comes from the collection of herbs. This may not seem much, but when you're on the bottom of global poverty levels that 12 per cent is significant for survival. Our emphasis in supporting local communities is always to realise the economic value of natural resources and traditional trades.

Instead of dealing with just a single trader, we work with community forest user groups to source our herbs. Our spikenard and juniper, for example, is gathered by the Humla Conservation – a non-government organisation in the remote district of Humla. Our apricot oil is hand pressed in Mustang and our black cardamom is sourced from a monastery and supports monks in retreat.

At Lo Kapan School, we've taught the amchis massage skills to make them more attractive to five-star spas. We train them as preventative healthcare specialists, as legally they can't work abroad as healthcare practitioners. But we require that the hotels and spas that hire them spend the



Herbs provide 12 per cent of rural income

WILD EARTH BY NUMBERS

- The company has nine retail ranges, with 179 products. The professional spa line, Jamepeche, features 26 products
- 50 per cent of turnover is from professional sales and 50 per cent from retail
- The company distributes to 30 countries
- Foreign exports account for 62 per cent of sales
- Wild Earth supplies seven spas directly
- It makes two to three private-label products a year
- The company has 20 full-time employees and 10 part-time employees
- With 282 bars sold every month, Yak Milk Soap is the most popular product

equivalent of their salaries – usually US\$150 (€117 or £79) a month – on amchi training, or to pay the wages of amchi practitioners in rural clinics.

Q Why and how does Wild Earth empower local women?

A Most Nepalese women come from simple backgrounds and don't have high levels of education or self-esteem. Employing them makes a profound difference to their status.

Q Why is Wild Earth committed to organic certification?

A Organic certification can increase the value of a product by up to 30 per cent. In Nepal, the coffee and tea industries have had success in organic certification and now we're working on certification for medicinal plants – which would be of huge value to local communities. We have approached some big organisations such as Ecocert, but they're not willing to invest the money required to determine an organic benchmark for medicinal plants, and to train certifiers. This commitment is made more challenging by the political turbulence our country is facing right now.

Q Which well-known spas do you supply?

A We are the preferred supplier of Shangri-La's Chi spas, and supply Spa Resources International in the Middle East.

Q What are your biggest international markets and how do you plan to grow overseas?

A Last year 27 per cent of our products were purchased in the US with no

marketing. This is our largest market, and one which we have more plans for in 2007.

We want to see Wild Earth sold by small retailers and speciality spas – companies that want something that cannot be found in large department stores and want to invest in a company with integrity. We're looking to create new ways for distribution in the UK, via The Leela UK Group, and in Russia, through Khelo.

Q How do you carry out research and development?

A I look to traditional texts and local healers for inspiration, but requests also come from our distributors. Initially we determine what we want a product to do and why. Checking whether the plants we need are sustainable follows on from this.

Q What are your short-term and long-term future plans?

A Next year we want to launch the Wild Earth Spa Academy, to enable us to provide graduate training for therapists across Asia.

In the long term, our focus will be on our foundation. The Sowa Rigpa Foundation has been set up to provide funds for scientific research into the sustainability and efficacy of medicinal Himalayan herbs and treatments.

Part of the funds will help my work with the Missouri Botanical Garden to digitalise the scents of high-altitude plants. This region is known for its unique and pungent plant aromas, which are of great interest to manufacturers. We want to ensure that the communities where the raw genetic material is collected gain some benefit from this. ●

