

Going natural

PAAVAN MATHEMA

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Nepal's Himalaya is a rich storehouse of herbs, many of them rare and with medicinal properties. The irony of it is that Nepal exports much of these herbs in raw form only to be bought back again as ready-made medicines or cosmetic products.

But lately, a herb-based industry for personal care products is slowly gaining momentum. In addition to production of herbal massage oils, perfumes and hair oils, an increasing number of small or medium-scale industries are now involved in manufacturing herbal soaps.

"The people here have an age-old knowledge of how these herbs can be used as remedies," says Carroll Dunham of Wild Earth that produces a diverse range of herbal products and services, "it is this knowledge that we tap into to create herbal solutions."

Non-herbal soaps are powder-based while herbal soaps are oil based, making them a better option for skin care. With Nepal's middle class becoming more health-conscious domestic demand is also growing.

"Our domestic customers used to be mainly foreign, but now local clients are increasing their interest as well," says Sambhu Kumar Lama of Farmhouse Herbal Industry which produces the appropriately named My Favourite Soap. Yak Milk soap, whose key ingredient is yak milk, is one of the most popular herbal soaps. "But transporting the milk from the mountains to here safely is a difficult task," says Sanjiv Pandey of Bounty Himalaya. "the problem is not just with milk but other medicinal and aromatic plants as well."



The industry does not have a stable source of quality herbs. In addition, the prices fluctuate without warning. "What we need is to create a sustainable source of our raw materials," says Dunham, who is developing permanent links with herb cultivators.

The herbal soaps face tough competition in the market from commercial brands. "It is next to impossible to compete with them because of the high cost of our ingredients," adds Darshana Shrestha of Nature Nepal. The competition is not just from non-herbal soaps but also 'fake' herbal soaps

that use low-quality materials.

Herbal companies thus opt for niche marketing, using goodwill and personal links. But the main focus is not on retail selling of the soaps but on sales by order, which mostly come from abroad.

Last year, Nepal exported an estimated \$ 500,000 worth of herbal soaps to the US, Europe, Japan, Korea, India, Taiwan and elsewhere. This figure could be much higher if the government had a recognised certification system that is demanded by some importing countries.





LIVING IT UP A New Rub

FOR THOSE SPA-GOERS WHO ARE TIRED of Japanese sand baths and who contemplate Moroccan mud body wraps or Javanese exfoliating scrubs with a faded sigh, there is now the Himalayan Tsangpo Ritual. The latest curiosity to emerge from the world apothecarium is based on *sowa rigpa*, or Tibetan traditional medicine, and is available at the Chi spas in the Edsa Shangri-La, Manila, and the Shangri-La Hotel, Bangkok. It will also be introduced to spas at the chain's upcoming properties in the Maldives, New York City, Paris, and Boracay in the Philippines.

Beneficiaries of this procedure are first scrubbed with salt crystals gathered by nomads from the ancient dry beds of the Tethys Sea, located on the Tibetan Plateau at 15,000 feet (4,500 m). The salt is mixed with high-altitude herbs like spikenard that apparently calm the senses. After the scrub comes a slathering of Himalayan mountain mud containing fulvic acids. Known as *silagit*, it has been used for centuries as an anti-inflammatory agent and to improve circulation. The treatment is completed with a bath and either a head-and-shoulder massage (in Manila) or a full-body massage (in

Bangkok). Massages are done to the sound of singing bowls—the standing bells common in Buddhist meditation. The Himalayan Tsangpo Ritual will set you back \$130 for two hours at the Edsa Shangri-La, Manila, (63-2) 633 8888. At the Shangri-La Hotel, Bangkok (66-2) 236 7777, the treatment costs just over \$230.



- 1 Potent harvest Amchis, or medicine men, gather herbs
- 2 High sea Salt crystals from dry beds on the Tibetan Plateau
- 3 Got your back The salt-and-herb scrub is applied to the sound of chiming bells