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Patterns of change: the dynamics of medicinal plant trade in far-western Nepal

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Abstract

Ethnopharmacological relevance

Combined quantitative and qualitative environmental product trade studies, undertaken in the same location over time, are instrumental in identifying plant species with commercial demand and explaining what drives temporal changes. Yet such dynamic studies are rare, including for Himalayan medicinal plants that have been large-scale traded for millennia.

Aim of the study

To (i) investigate changes in medicinal plant trade in the past 17 years, and (ii) identify the main factors driving changes, using a study of Darchula District in far-western Nepal.

Materials and Methods

Medicinal plant production network data were collected from March to August 2016, for the fiscal year 2014-15, for Darchula District in far-western Nepal through 167 quantitative (58 harvesters, 38 sub-local traders, 25 local traders, 25 central wholesalers, and 21 regional wholesalers), 61 qualitative (15 sub-local traders, 19 local traders, 15 central wholesalers, and 12 regional wholesalers) interviews, and four focus group discussions. Results were compared to previously unpublished similar data for Darchula District for the year 1997-98, using quantitative and qualitative interviews with 10 local traders, 20 central wholesalers, and 53 regional wholesalers. Data analysis was guided by an analytical framework derived from Global Production Network theory. Quantitative data were used to estimate changes in 12 indicators while the qualitative information allowed identification of the factors driving observed changes in the indicators.

Results

The volume of medicinal plants traded from Darchula District in the fiscal year 2014-15 was 401 tons with a harvester value of USD 5.5 million, representing a 2.3 fold increase in volume and 17.2 fold increase in value compared to 1997-98. Trade in the two observation years comprised 30 air-dried plant products (from 28 identified species as well as lichens and a mineral substance); 12 products were traded in both periods, while seven disappeared, and 11 new products entered the trade. The number of traders increased from 10 to 63, mainly due to the emergence of a single high value

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