CHANGING PLANET

Nomads of Dolpo

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It is one of the last nomadic trading caravans in the world. For more than a thousand years, the Dolpo-pa people of Nepal have depended for their survival on a biannual journey across the Himalayas.

Once the summer harvest is over, the people of Dolpo sew flags and red pommels into the ears of their yaks, rub butter on their horns and throw barley seeds to the cold wind. Then they leave the fertile middle hills of their homeland and head north, to the plateaux of Tibet, where they carry out an ancient trade with their Tibetan neighbours.

Dolpo is a wild, mountainous region in the far western reaches of Nepal. Once part of the ancient Zhang Zhung kingdom, it claims some of the highest inhabited villages on earth. There are no roads and no electricity; access is by small plane or several days' trek over high passes. Fierce winter snowstorms ensure that these routes are impassable for up to six months of the year, when Dolpo is isolated from the rest of the country. But during the summer months, when the alpine fields are alive with yellow poppies and the lower slopes are furrowed with barley and buckwheat, the paths are navigable again.

Dolpo is beautiful, remote and culturally fascinating, but it is also one of the poorest areas in Nepal. It lies in the rain-shadow of the mighty Mount Dhaulagiri, so monsoon rains needed to irrigate the land are infrequent, and eking out a living from the arid soil is a challenge. Most Dolpo households only produce enough food to last for six months. Staple foods include tsampa (roasted barley flour), yak and mutton, eaten with radishes or wild nettles gathered from the fields. And in a tree-less environment, it is only yak dung that provides the fuel for fires.

By acting as high-altitude middlemen in an ancient grain-salt trade between the Dropka nomads of Tibet and the Nepali of the south, the Dolpo-pa have for centuries boosted their meagre food supplies. They originally carried grains such as corn and millet from farms in the temperate valleys of Nepal; these they traded for rock salt gathered by the Dropka from salt flats high on the Chang Tang Plateau. The Tibetans needed grains and the Dolpo-pa lacked salt: it was a perfect trade.

But the journey north across the Himalayas was, and still is, perilous. *"It is a difficult journey,* says Tsering Samdup, a Tibetan teacher from Dolpo. *"Leading a caravan of yaks and horses is a tough job. The weather is cold and we face many difficulties on the way."* The route winds through forests of juniper bush and silver birch, along the edge of turquoise waters of holy Phoksundo lake and past millennia-old stupas strewn with prayer-flags. Rickety bridges improvised from birch poles and stone slabs give access to the rugged upland country of Upper Dolpo, where snow leopards, white wolves and rare Himalayan blue sheep still roam.

But this extraordinary journey has slowly been changing. For the past few years, the use of state-subsidised iodised salt from India has replaced Tibetan rock salt. This has helped in reducing the previously high incidence of goitre, which was endemic in Nepal until the early 1980s, and which was often caused by iodine

deficiency. But there is now far less demand for rock-salt. *"Although many Dolpo-pa still prefer to use Tibetan salt in their salt-butter tea,"* says Samdup.

"It is now a much more complex and dynamic trading system than the salt-trade model," says Jamie McGuiness of tour operator Project Himalaya. *"The locals in Dolpo are adapting to whatever trade they can to turn a profit and give them greatest food security."*

The commodity that is now providing a profit for the Dolpo-pa is the Chinese caterpillar fungus known as *yarchagumba* (meaning *"summer grass, winter worm"* in Tibetan), which has become one of the most expensive natural medical resources in the world. Found during the monsoon on alpine grasslands that lie above 3,000 metres, *yarchagumba* is neither a grass nor a worm, but a "parasitic complex" which is part Tibetan ghost-moth, part fungus. Although it is has been used by practitioners of both Traditional Chinese and Tibetan Medicines for hundreds of years, it is only in recent years that it has commanded high prices and has become known as 'Himalayan viagra', for its aphrodisiac qualities. According to biologist and Research Fellow Uttam Babu Shrestha, who is conducting one of the few studies into the fungus, the market price of *yarchagumba* increased by up to 2300% in the decade between 2001 and 2011, and more than 70,000 people a year are now involved in the gathering process of Dolpo's two-month harvest in May and June. *"Dolpa district is regarded as a major warehouse of Chinese caterpillar fungus in Nepal,"* says Uttam Babu Shrestha. *"There is no single inch of habitat left untouched by the harvesters at the end of the harvesting season."*

Instead of grains, the Dolpo-pa now sell yarchagumba for cash to Shingpa farmers and Khampa and Dropka nomads, at a designated market on the border. They use the cash to buy supplies of rice, grains, sugar and other products such as solar powered lighting kits, cheap alcohol, thermos flasks, watches and expensive *dzi* (highly-prized stone beads). *"The money they earn means they can also send their children to better quality boarding schools,"* says Jamie McGuinness.

However, caravan numbers have been dwindling for years and in 2015 it is uncertain as to how many will make the journey north. Once the Dolpo-pas' caravans consisted of extended family groups; now it is largely only men who travel with their yaks and mules, while women and children stay at home to tend to the crops. Plans to cut a road through Dolpo, from Marim Bhanjyang on the Tibetan plateau to the Dho valley, could ultimately mean the yak caravans become redundant. In addition, the cross-border trade is restricted by the window of time that China and Nepal allow. For years nomads were free to trade at any time, but in 2013 came to a halt. *"The situation changes often",* says Kim Bannister of Kamzang Journeys. *"In 2014, the border was only open for 15 days. In 2015, there is a risk that the border might be closed for the whole year."*

The prospect of a millennium-old journey coming to an end is a sad one for Samdup. *"This border market is very important for the Dolpo-pas, because it is the only market from where they purchase all their supplies for the year,"* he says. *"And as the Dolpo-pa and Tibetans share the same culture and traditions, our gatherings are culturally important to us. We don't want to lose them."*

MEET THE AUTHOR

Joanna Eede was an editorial consultant to Survival International with a particular interest in the relationship between man and nature and tribal peoples. She has created and edited three environmental books, including Portrait of England (Think Publishing, 2006) and We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples (Quadrille, 2009). Joanna writes for newspapers and magazines on subjects such as the repatriation of wild Przewalski horses to Mongolia, the whales of the Alboran sea, the chimpanzees of the Mahale rainforest, uncontacted tribes of the Amazon rainforest and the Hadza hunter gatherer people of Tanzania. Future ideas include a book about Tibet's nomads.

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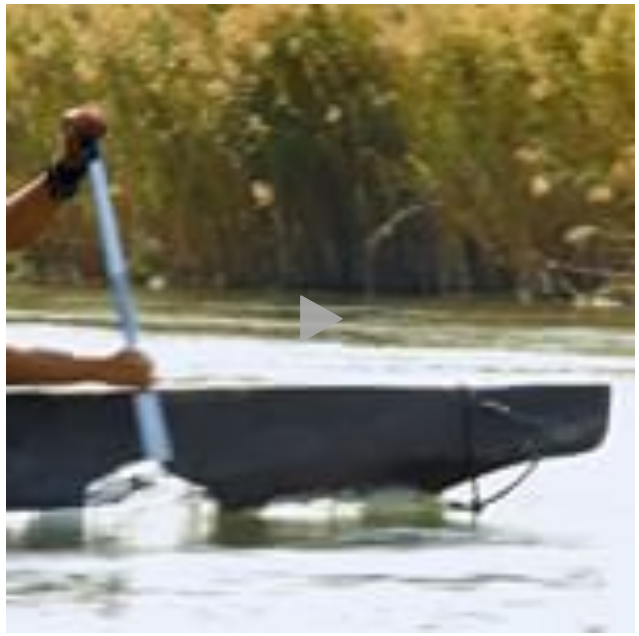

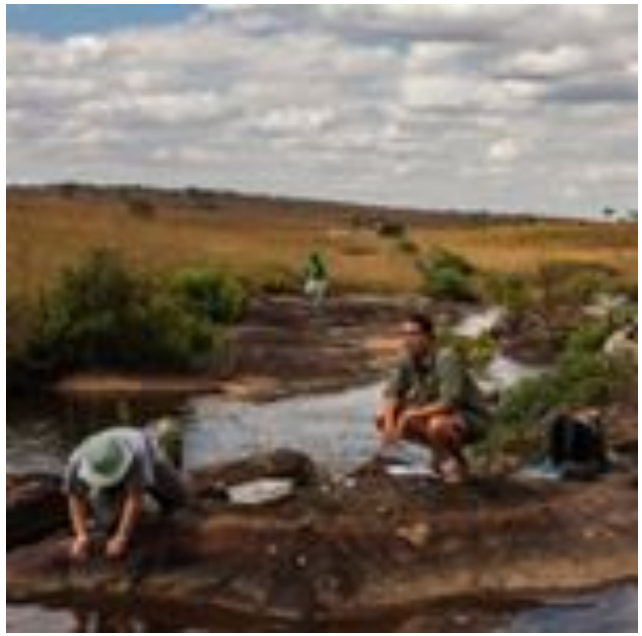

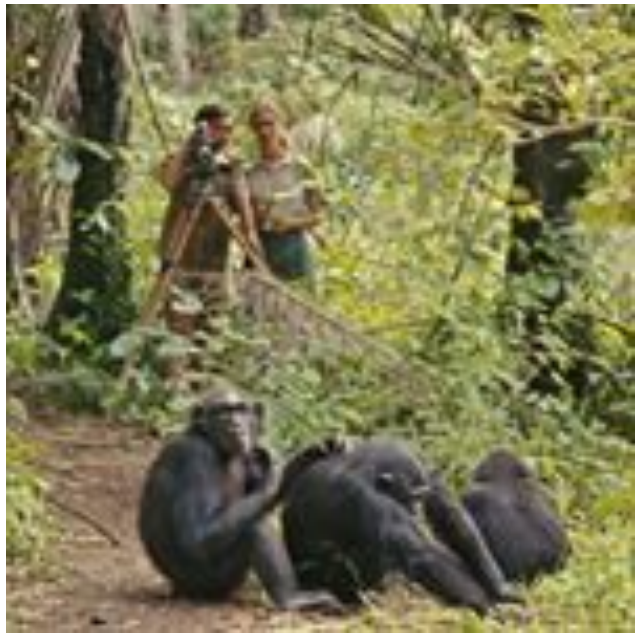

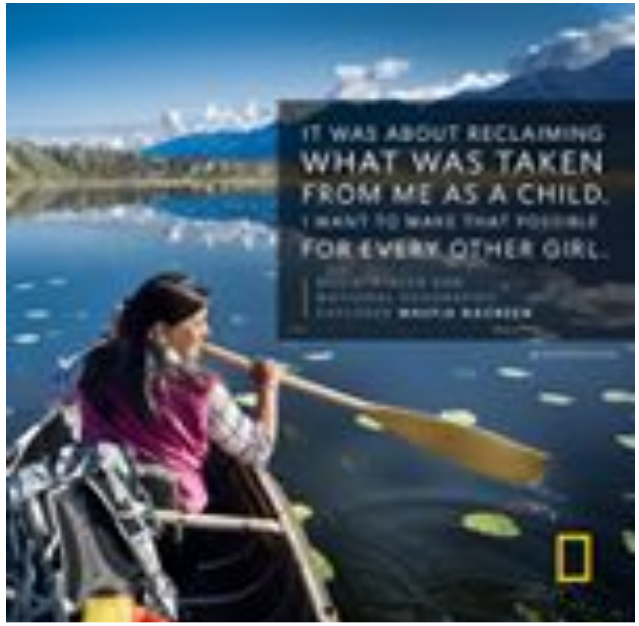
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