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Harvest and trade of caterpillar mushroom (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) and the implications for sustainable use in the Tibet Region of Southwest China

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Abstract

Ethnopharmacological relevance

Caterpillar mushroom (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) is a unique medicinal fungi which is only found in alpine grasslands in Himalayan mountain regions and the Tibetan Plateau. Known locally as Yartsa Gunbu, it has been widely used in Tibetan and Chinese Medicine for centuries. It is crucial to understand local commercial harvest and trade practices of caterpillar mushroom

to support the sustainable management of this valuable resource. However, data derived from empirically grounded research is currently limited, particularly in China.

Aim of this study

The research aims to provide the most up-to-date insights into caterpillar mushroom harvest and trade in the main production area of the Tibet Region in Southwest China and to generate policy recommendations for sustainable use.

Materials and methods

The research was conducted in 2015–2016 in six Tibetan communities located in two counties in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Southwest China. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from in-depth interviews with local households engaged in caterpillar mushroom harvesting ($n = 157$), local caterpillar mushroom traders ($n = 14$), and from focus groups discussions ($n = 5$) with regional caterpillar mushroom industry stakeholders.

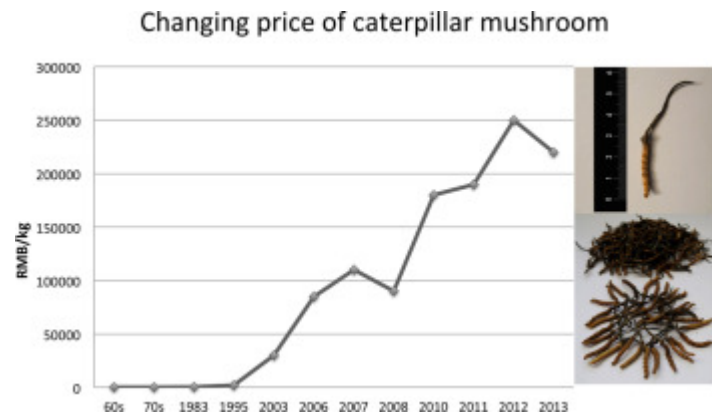
Results

The research found large regional- and community-level differences in caterpillar mushroom harvest practices. The harvest practices of communities involved in the co-management of a Nature Reserve were more sustainable than those communities not involved in such a scheme, and this was due to the external support and training provided via the co-management scheme. Moreover, a customary tenure system was proving effective for avoiding competition over caterpillar mushroom collection. However, in both counties, narrow marketing channel and non-grading system in trade limits the possibility of improving the local benefits generated from the commercial harvest of caterpillar mushroom. Meanwhile, the local traders play an important bridging role in the value chain and generate greater benefits from product grading.

Conclusion

To support the sustainable management of the caterpillar mushroom industry in Southwest China, the prefectural governments should invest in training on appropriate harvesting techniques and the dissemination of market information. It is also critical that prefectural governments recognize and support the customary tenure system of mushroom collection to avoid competition between collectors.

Graphical abstract



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Keywords

Commercial non-timber forest products; Customary tenure; Medicinal plants; Value chain; Tibet region

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