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Overharvesting turns 'Himalayan viagra' into a 'vulnerable' species

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DEHRADUN: The world's costliest fungus — *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* — also known as Himalayan Viagra, which sells in international markets for upwards of Rs 20 lakh per kg, has entered the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, the world's most comprehensive information source on the global conservation status of animal, fungi and plant species. The list which was released on July 9, has placed the fungus, known for its aphrodisiac and rejuvenation properties, in the 'vulnerable' category.

Citing the reason for placing the fungus in the vulnerable category, IUCN said "its spread has declined by at least 30% over the past 15 years as a result of overharvesting." The fungus, also known as keeda jadi in Uttarakhand because of its caterpillar-like appearance, is endemic to the Himalayan and Tibetan plateau and is found in China, Bhutan, Nepal and India. In India, it is primarily found in Uttarakhand in the higher reaches of districts like Pithoragarh and Chamoli.

Speaking to TOI, Vivek Saxena, India representative of IUCN, said, "The purpose of putting the fungus in the Red List under the 'vulnerable category' is to ensure that proper government policies are implemented in order to conserve it so that it remains in the wild."

Meanwhile, the inclusion in the Red List is going to impact hundreds of villagers of Uttarakhand who were dependent on collecting the fungus as their primary source of livelihood. The fungus sells locally for around Rs 10 lakh per kg and goes on to be sold in international markets like China (where it is highly prized) at upwards of Rs 20 lakh per kg.