

Himalayan Gold Rush

Himalayan Rescue Association

Health Needs Survey of Yarsagumba

Collectors Near Yak Kharka

(Manang District) 19-20 May 2016

Bidur Pandit MBBS
Pranawa Koirala MBBS
Pratibha Koirala MBBS
Ken Zafren, MD

Yarsagumba: “Himalayan Viagra”

- *Opiochordyceps sinensis*
- Parasitizes larvae (caterpillars) of “ghost moths.”
- Use in Tibetan medicine described in 15th Century
- Main use is as an aphrodisiac in China
- Also claimed to increase energy and reduce fatigue

A photograph of a high-altitude mountain landscape. In the foreground, a camp of several colorful tents (blue, orange, white) is set up on a rocky, sparsely vegetated slope. A dirt path leads up the slope. In the background, a deep river valley is visible, with steep, rocky mountainsides and a river winding through the bottom. The sky is overcast with grey clouds.

Yarsagumba is found throughout the Himalayas and on the Tibetan Plateau.

- Found at altitudes of 4000-5000 m
- Most harvesting in Nepal during premonsoon in the month of Jestha (May-June)
- Thousands of people travel to areas where Yarsagumba is found.
- Prominent collecting areas include Dolpo, Rukum and Manang Districts.
- Most popular area in Manang District is above Yak Kharka (4020 m).

The Himalayan Gold Rush

- Nepal is a poor country with few jobs.
- Economic conditions worsened in most areas after the Great Earthquake of April 2015.
- Yarsagumba can be a financial bonanza.
- Few people benefit.
- Many fall deeper into poverty.



Logistics

- Survey was planned for May 2015 but postponed due to the Great Earthquake.
- Logistical support was provided by Mountain Tiger Nepal.



Demographics

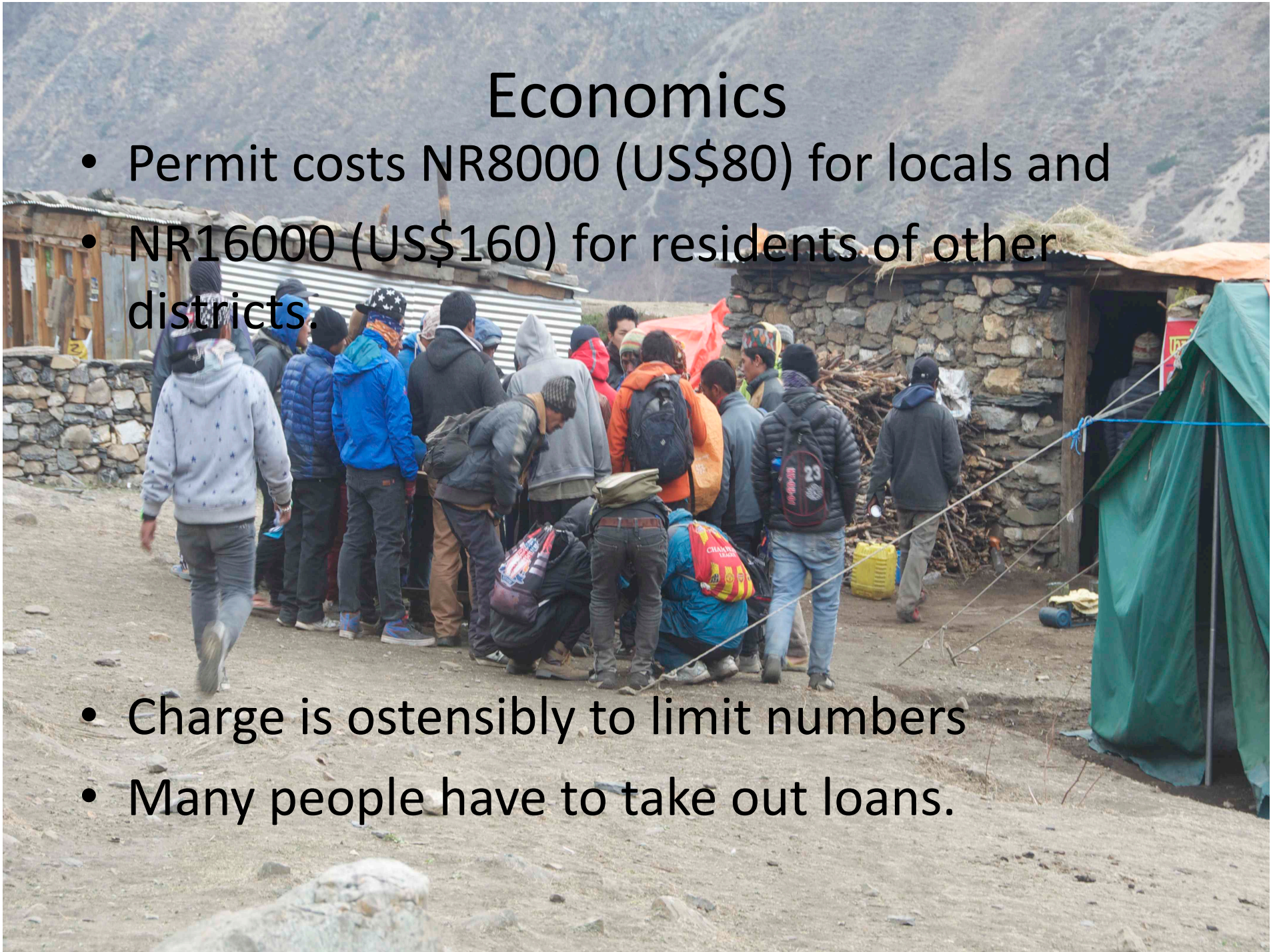
- About 800 Yarsagumba collectors in and near Yak Kharka
- Most from low elevations in Gorkha District
- Some from local villages
- Ages 10 years to early 60s
- A few pregnant women
- Many people come year after year.



Economics

- Permit costs NR8000 (US\$80) for locals and
- NR16000 (US\$160) for residents of other districts.

- Charge is ostensibly to limit numbers
- Many people have to take out loans.



The background of the slide is a vibrant, abstract floral pattern. A large, central red rose is the focal point, surrounded by various shades of pink, purple, and blue petals. Green leaves are interspersed among the flowers. Three dried caterpillars are placed on the image: two are positioned vertically on the left side of the red rose, and one is positioned horizontally on the right side. The caterpillars are light brown with darker, segmented markings.

Price depends on size.

- Large – NR500 (US\$5)
- Medium – NR 300 (US\$3)
- Small – NR 200 (US\$2)

Living Conditions

- Most stay in tents or under tarps.
- Many collectors have inadequate clothing.
- Most keep warm at night in sleeping bags or using blankets.



Long Days – Little Food

- Early start at first light as early as 5 AM
- 2-3 hour walk uphill to collecting areas
- Many eat only one meal a day.
- Many walk to collecting areas with little or no food or water.
- Return to Yak Kharka at 4-5 PM
- Lucky ones get something to eat before dinner.



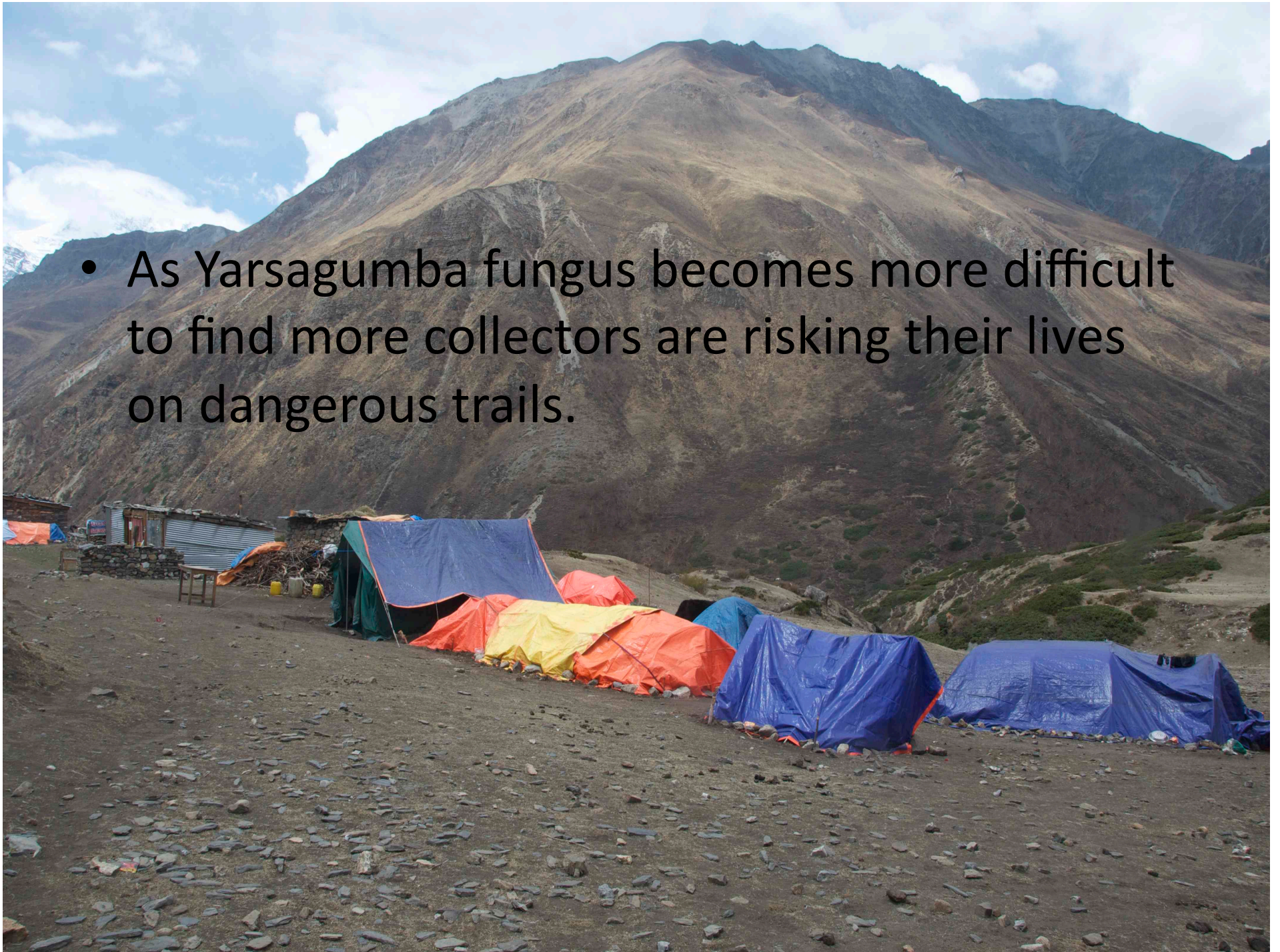
Health Problems

Acute Mountain Sickness is common.

Many would benefit by descent, but are reluctant to leave because they would be unable to recover the cost of the permit.

Upper respiratory and gastrointestinal symptoms are common.

- As Yarsagumba fungus becomes more difficult to find more collectors are risking their lives on dangerous trails.



Health Resources

- Temporary police post
- Nearest health care facility is health post at Manang – 4 hrs walk – closed during collecting season in 2015
- HRA Aid Post closes at start of season.
- 3 Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHVs) – normally have basic meds, but health post was closed.



Health Needs

- Education
- Improved living conditions: warm clothes; better shelter; improved access to food and water
- Training in high altitude illness for providers
- Improved sanitation: hand sanitizer, toilets
- Possible role for HRA

Acknowledgments

- HRA Board of Directors
- Prakash Adhikari
- Dr. Buddha Basnyat
- Mountain Tiger Nepal

The end:
Please wake the person next to you.

