



Inspiring Initiative: Promoting Camel Products as a Specialty and Health Food

Land: India

Initiative by: LPPS

From Heirloom to Unique Selling Point



The Chief Minister of Rajasthan, India, committed her government to saving the camel and its potential for supporting livelihoods in the Thar Desert, after reading about the situation in the local Drynet Newsletter.



SETTING THE INITIATIVE

The camel is part and parcel of Rajasthan's culture and tradition. They were once the lifeline of the rural population, providing transportation, doing heavy agricultural work and providing a bulwark against droughts. Traditional camel husbandry is an ingenious way of converting the scattered and seasonally varying vegetation of the Thar Desert into protein and energy. Camels roam freely throughout most of the year, foraging where they can and are only supervised during the breeding season and when crops are growing during the monsoon months. But with the growth of irrigated agriculture and the increased availability of motorised transport, rural dwellers have come to see camels as outmoded, and even a threat to farmers. As a consequence the camel population of Rajasthan has dwindled by almost 50% in the past decade, to about 400,000.

A local NGO, Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan (LPPS) is involved in finding new ways for villagers to benefit from keeping camels. Camel milk is one product that has a potential to transform the way local people view camels. Their milk is increasingly recognised as having many medicinal effects, including anti-bacterial and anti-viral properties that help people fight diseases; it also contains an insulin-like substance that reduces blood sugar levels in diabetes patients. In nutritional terms, it has three times as much Vitamin C as cow milk, is low in calories and is suitable for people who are lactose intolerant. There is growing demand for camel milk (and female camels) in the Gulf States, and the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations estimates that the global market potential for camel milk could be worth billions of dollars. But this is not the only camel product with potential. Camels also provide a range of other products (hair, skin and bones for traditional crafts), and camel safaris offer opportunities for pastoralists to participate in India's booming tourist economy.

MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

LPPS is adapting a two-pronged approach toward valorising camel products, raising public awareness about camel products and working with camel breeders to help them tap into these new niche markets. Only a few years ago, most Indians would have been disgusted by the idea of drinking camel milk. LPPS has successfully worked with the media to make its medicinal value known. It organised an international workshop in Jaipur, the state capital, in which camel experts and medical researchers participated, and which was well covered in the national media. It has also promoted camel milk and ice cream ("a low calorie desert dessert") in the regional media, receiving much attention for these products.

At the same time LPPS is working with camel breeders to make them aware of new opportunities. It began by organising community outreach meetings which led to the formation of six clusters of self-help groups of camel breeders. LPPS is now training camel breeders in hygienic milk production and is working on building a supply chain and a recognizable branding for camel milk. It has also built up a client base of 35 diabetes patients in the nearby city of Jaisalmer who receive regular deliveries of camel milk, which helps them to reduce their dependency on medicines. Most recently they have been working with a renowned artisanal paper maker in using camel dung to make paper which is then fashioned into diaries and cards. These products were launched at the Pushkar camel fair in November 2008 to much acclaim. These initial achievements now need backing up by appropriate government policies and targeted research efforts.