

Nepalese Silk

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Introduction

Sericulture, the production of silk thread from the cocoons of silk worms, provides environmentally sustainable livelihoods for the people of Nepal, specifically women (Neupane & Thapa, 2001), and hold potential as a major export product.

Product Information and Benefits to Nepal

Silkworm cocoons are harvested off of the trees that the silkworms feed on, typically mulberry trees. The cocoons are then boiled and formed into long threads that can then be weaved together to create fabric (Neupane & Thapa, 2001). The most labour intensive part of producing silk is the boiling of the cocoons and the reeling of the threads. The actual harvest is easier than having to till the land, which would be necessary for many other agrifood products (Ojha, 2011). The local people of Nepal rely heavily on agriculture because it is the economic means of 80% of the population (Veenhuizen, 2006). Sericulture is an excellent option for Nepalese people in rural, hill abundant areas because it is less labour intensive than many other types of agriculture. In order to maximize their profits, Nepalese farmers should sell the silk thread, rather than just the unprocessed cocoons. In 2011, silkworm cocoons were sold for 375 rupees per kilogram, while silk thread can be sold for 2800-7000 rupees per kilogram (Ojha, 2011). These farmers are being forced to sell the cocoons, and lose profit because they lack the proper tools necessary to create thread. The government of Nepal could invest in sericulture by providing grants for the purchase of proper silk processing tools for farmers.

Sericulture provides many economic, environmental and social benefits to Nepal. A study of rural farmers in Nepal was conducted and concluded that, the gross income without sericulture totaled 177,625 rupees per hectare, while the gross income with sericulture totaled 289,624 rupees per hectare (Neupane & Thapa, 2001). This significant increase in gross income proves

that sericulture positively benefits the Nepalese hillside farmers economically. Sericulture, and specifically the planting of mulberry trees has been shown to enhance soil fertility (Neupane & Thapa, 2001). Sericulture has also had a positive impact on the environment because it has provided an alternative form of agriculture for Nepalese hillside farmers, which would otherwise have been forced to engage in other types of less environmentally friendly agriculture.

Sericulture has many social benefits for the local people of Nepal. The production of silk thread from cocoons is work that is typically carried out by women, allowing women to generate income. Sericulture also provides a less labour intensive alternative to other types of agriculture, which inevitably becomes the responsibility of women. It has also been demonstrated that sericulture significantly improves the literacy rates of both men and women in rural Nepal (Neupane & Thapa, 2001).

The productivity rate of sericulture can be improved by having access to the proper tools, including the means to boil the cocoons and reels to string out the thread. Planting mulberry trees in forests is another way of attracting more silk worms and providing them with sufficient food for them to create quality cocoons. The government of Nepal has introduced a hybrid silkworm that has been modified to be more productive in Nepal (Ojha, 2011). Farmers interested in sericulture should ask their government for access to the hybrid silk worms to maximize their productivity.

Export Potential to Canada

Good quality silk is in high demand in developed countries such as Canada, and as Canadians are becoming more concerned with ethical issues when purchasing products, they will be satisfied with the environmental and social benefits of Nepalese silk. Bilateral trade between

Nepal and Canada has been successfully established since 1970, with hand-made clothing accounting for 85% of exports from Nepal (Embassy of Nepal, 2013). With this clothing market already established, selling silk thread and silk garments to Canada would most likely become a successful business. The agrifood product, unlike many others, does not expire, does not require specific storage conditions, and does not have to be sold quickly. This provides many benefits, especially when products are being shipped over seas. Such as being able to wait until they have produced a sufficient amount of silk thread, or garments to ship, whereas with perishable food products they would have to be shipped very often or else they would not make the long journey to Canada. According to Ojha, the annual demand for silk thread is 200 tons, and currently 1.5 tons are being exported from Nepal (2011). The amount of silk exported from Nepal can surely be increased through government investment in sericulture, and farmers would not have to worry about not being able to sell their products because silk is in such high demand all over the world.

Nepalese farmers that are interested in starting their own silk harvesting project should seek financial aid from the government, as they will need a certain amount of money to plant more trees if they want to maximize their production, as well as to purchase the tools necessary for creating silk thread out of cocoons. The Nepalese government has established an Agriculture Perspective Plan to help farmers acquire the proper technology and infrastructure that is necessary to be successful, it including micro financing to attempt to reduce poverty (Veenhuizen, 2006). Another option farmers have to receive financial aid is to try and qualify for the many international aid programs that are available through the UN, the World Bank, and numerous non-governmental organizations.

Canadian Contacts

There are many Canadian clothing retailers that would like to advertise their products as ethical, in regards to both the environment and social issues. Neon Buddha is one Canadian company that advertises their interests in the global community, and donates 1% of all sales back to the women who make the clothing in Thailand. Neon Buddha does not currently offer silk clothing, which provides the opportunity for Nepalese sericulture farmers. A representative can be contacted at 1-800-315-4408. Alchemy Fashions is another clothing company interested in the ethical production of clothing that currently receives exports from India. They could be willing to extend their productions to Nepal and include some eco-friendly silk garments. A representative can be contacted at 1-877-568-8733. Even clothing companies that do not focus on just eco-friendly clothing, might be interested in starting an eco-friendly silk line. The Hudson's Bay Company is known for its high quality clothing, so it might be a good marketing strategy for them to offer high quality, and eco-friendly silk products. A representative can be contacted at 1-800-521-2364.

Critical Analysis

The main issue with silk is animal rights activists arguing that it is unethical to boil the cocoons with the silk worm still inside, which ultimately kills the worm. I believe that this would not stop the majority of consumers, and only a very small group of people would boycott silk for this reason. Ultimately, silk products made in Nepal have excellent export potential to Canada and also provide sustainable livelihoods for the local communities.

References

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