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saving a civilisation

AN AMERICAN DOCTOR IS BEING DUBBED MOTHER TIBET FOR HER LIFE-SAVING WORK WITH THE COUNTRY'S CHILDREN

Tibet, it is often said, is the bellwether for the human race. The spiritual home of the Dalai Lama, it has a symbolism that resonates around the world. In the face of crippling poverty, occasioned by their reluctance to bow to Chinese control, Tibetans show an inexhaustible stoicism based on their faith, humility and pacifism. But it has brought them to the brink of extinction.

This threat was identified by chance by Nancy Harris, a Californian doctor, who in 1990 had decided to study traditional Chinese medicine in Beijing, before travelling to Tibet. Her personal voyage of discovery was soon interrupted by what greeted her there: "It wasn't that the child beggars were everywhere," she recalls, "it was the fact they belied their age: children who looked four or seven would state their ages as eight and 14."

Intrigued by this, Harris sought an explanation. But there was a lack of research because the 50-year-long dispute with China had denied access to such investigations. So, in 1993, Harris launched the Terma Foundation and set about doing her own study, which spanned seven years and involved the weighing and measuring of thousands of Tibetan children aged up to seven.

The results were shocking. Of the 2,500 studied, 52 per cent were found to be suffering from severe stunting, 40 per cent showed signs of protein-energy deficiency and 67 per cent had rickets. Later humanitarian studies substantiated the results. What this meant was the children were showing extreme signs of malnutrition, losing their natural hair colour, appearing blond rather than raven-haired, were half-size, and would have lower intelligence and less physical capacity to work.

"One million Tibetan children are at risk of premature death," the Terma study concluded. "Without intervention, this culture stands at risk of virtual extinction in its natural habitat."

Remarkably, during her researches, Harris, who it must be remem-



Above Harris weighs a nomad baby in Nagchu opposite
Measuring a child's height with a home-made 'stadiometer'

bered was still working as the UK equivalent of GP in California, managed to win over the tacit permission of the Chinese for her endeavours. Subsequently, Terma launched a series of projects to address the problems she had identified. But it hasn't simply been a case of mobilizing Western agencies with their ready supply of medicines.

Harris and the Terma Foundation have tackled the issues much more holistically. When she identified problems, Harris sought traditional remedies. So, for instance, faced with the rickets epidemic, caused by a lack of Vitamin D, Harris launched a campaign to encourage 'chugkpa'. These were traditional, highly-supervised daily sunbathing periods for infants who, due to the high altitude, are commonly swaddled under nine layers of

clothing. The tradition had simply died out.

In terms of malnutrition, rather than offering supplements, Harris and Terma identified a natural resource, an indigenous plant (with similar constituents to grain) called Droma. Where it was becoming increasingly rare for it to be farmed, Terma now has a programme to encourage its growth and distribution.

These represent just two of the programmes the indomitable Harris has launched through Terma, but of course they are only touching the tip of the iceberg. Other projects include TB prevention and control, *Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies* campaigns and working with traditional Tibetan healers to identify indigenous sources of herbal remedies to manage prevalent health problems.

According to Tibetan tradition, 'terma' are ancient sacred texts that have been buried by angels until the time this wisdom can be safely uncovered and used for the benefit of all living beings. Which perfectly describes the impetus behind the work of the Terma Foundation ■
To find out more about the Terma Foundation, or how to support their work, visit www.terma.org