



AFAR IRDOOD, Ethiopia: A man mines blocks of salt from the Danakil Depression.



AFAR IRDOOD, Ethiopia: A camel caravan enters the salt mining area of the Danakil Depression.



AFAR IRDOOD, Ethiopia: The salt market in Berhale town in northern Afar, Ethiopia, is pictured.—AFP photos

MODERN LIFE INTRUDES ON ETHIOPIA'S ANCIENT SALT TRADE

'WE HOPE THERE WILL BE SOMETHING LIKE CARS'

LAKE ASALE, Ethiopia: Every morning, hundreds of men converge on a dry lakebed in a remote corner of Ethiopia, where they cleave the ground open with handaxes to extract salt, just as their fathers and grandfathers once did. They toil under the gaze of a caravan of camels who will carry their salt bricks to market, in a trek that historians estimate has gone on since the 6th century. But with the Ethiopian government opening the isolated northern region to investors and tourists by cutting new roads through surrounding mountains, the laborers, traders and caravan drivers that make up the industry say their traditional way of life could soon be lost.

"If it continues like this, it will stop our work," miner Musa Idris said as he stood on the cracked earth that fringes Lake Asale, where the miners work amid temperatures that can reach 50 degrees C (122 degrees F), making it one of the world's hottest places. Salt mining was once so vital to the economy of the depression that the seven-kilogram chunks of salt Idris and his colleagues hack from the ground were used as currency. While the trade is still important, it is no longer the only game in town.

Tourism moves in

Restaurants and hotels have sprung up in the area, also known as the Danakil depression, to cater to tourists who come from across the globe to visit the uniquely desolate landscape formed by the intersection of three tectonic

plates. The region has also attracted foreign firms that want to mine potash and send it to Asia. The presence of salt in the area has not escaped the attention of mining companies.

A handful of kilometers away from where Idris and his colleagues gather, an Ethiopian company has built a plant that sucks water from the lake into evaporation ponds, creating salt the miners say is of a better quality but costs more than the square blocks they mine from the lakebed. "The traditional way is quite different from ours. That one takes more toil and time," evaporation plant manager Maheri Asgedew said of the manual way of mining. Asgedew predicts that his plant, which only recently went into operation, would one day be the main supplier of salt in the area.

From camels to trucks

Perhaps no development has impacted the traditional salt industry like the new roads. Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous country and one of the continent's best-performing economies, with growth reaching nearly 10 percent in 2015. The government has made projects such as dams and road-building a priority as part of its strategy to end the poverty that afflicts around one in three of its citizens. Getting the salt-laden camels from Lake Asale to the nearest city Mekele used to be a four-day trek down rock-strewn gullies.

Now, the caravans terminate in Berhale, the region's main salt trading outpost which road

builders connected to Mekele by tarmac about five years ago. The journey takes only three days, an improvement that some of the camel drivers and laborers who help offload the salt bricks have welcomed, but which others worry is a sign that technology will soon put them all out of business.

About 5,000 blocks of salt arrive each day at a trading post situated on a dry riverbed at the edge of Berhale, from which they are loaded onto trucks that take them as far away as neighboring Kenya, said Ahmed Ali Ahmed, the deputy of an association of salt miners. "The road has brought a lot of change, because we can easily transport salt to Mekele," Ahmed told AFP. Ahmed is hopeful that, someday, they won't need to use camels at all. "We hope there will be something like cars," he said.

'We don't have anything else'

The Lake Asale miners like Idris have also grown tired of the industry's backbreaking labor and low wages, despite its long history in the area. "We have no water and sometimes we eat bad food," said Musa, whose daily pay of 500 birr (\$22, 21 euros) affords him a house in Hamed Ela, a ramshackle settlement of huts near the salt fields. "If technology comes and changes it, it would be better." But others embrace the traditional way. For them, it's simply the family business. "We see this as our farmland, so we don't have anything else but this," miner Idris Ibrahim said. "My children and grandchildren will hopefully mine in this area."—AFP



AFAR IRDOOD, Ethiopia : A man shaves blocks of salt from the Danakil Depression.



AFAR IRDOOD, Ethiopia: The landscape of the Danakil Depression is pictured.

PEDOMETERS TIED TO LESS FATIGUE FOR RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS PATIENTS

NEW YORK: Patients with rheumatoid arthritis who receive pedometers may be more active and feel less fatigued even if they are not told to use the trackers to aim for a specific number of steps, a small study suggests. All 96 study participants had rheumatoid arthritis, an immune system disorder that causes debilitating swelling and pain in the joints. Researchers randomly assigned patients to get a pedometer with or without a daily step goal, or to get only educational brochures with advice on becoming more active.

After 21 weeks, all of people with pedometers were walking more on average each day: 1,441 additional steps without a step goal and 1,656 extra steps with a goal. But the patients who didn't get pedometers actually got 747 fewer steps a day on average by the end of the study. Patients with pedometers reported statistically meaningful declines in fatigue during the study, but people who only got education did not. "We found that increasing activity just through walking decreased fatigue," said lead study author Dr Patricia Katz of the University of California, San Francisco. "Most of us probably don't realize how inactive we are until we start measuring our daily activity," Katz said by email. "Having a concrete goal, such as the number of daily steps, seems to help people become and stay active."

Every patient received the same educational brochure at the start. In the two groups that received pedometers, all of the participants were asked to keep a daily diary to record how many steps they logged. For one group with pedometers, researchers also assessed their activity levels at the start of the study and set goals for them to increase their average daily steps by 10 percent every two weeks.

Simple intervention

At the start of the study, participants were 54 years old on average and were

typically getting about 4,891 steps a day, which researchers classified as sedentary. Very few of them were getting at least 8,000 steps a day, which the researchers say is a healthy activity level. Beyond its small size, another limitation of the study is that researchers lacked data on how often participants wore the devices, which makes it difficult to get an accurate daily step count, the authors note in Arthritis Care and Research. It's also possible that the pedometer groups might not have improved as much if they hadn't also been recording their steps in a daily diary, which increases their engagement with the effort to be more active, said Dr Mitesh Patel, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia who wasn't involved in the study.

"Research indicates that for most people, pedometers and wearable devices are more likely to help change health behaviors if they are combined with an engagement strategy," Patel said by email. Generally, pedometers are most useful for people who are sedentary and unaware of their own level of inactivity, said Dr Lucas Carr, a physiology researcher at the University of Iowa who wasn't involved in the study. "This relatively simple intervention helped a very sedentary group of rheumatoid arthritis patients increase their activity at a level that is considered clinically significant," Carr said by email. "The largest health benefits are realized when an individual changes from doing nothing to doing something." While the study included only people with rheumatoid arthritis, it's possible pedometers might be useful for people with other chronic medical problems, said Dr David Geier, an orthopedic surgeon sports medicine specialist in Charleston, South Carolina who wasn't involved in the study. "It seems reasonable to think they could help stimulate activity," Geier said by email. "Physical activity would be helpful for almost everyone."—Reuters

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