THRIVE IMPACT FOUNDATION

Field report · Skardu, Baltistan

What a working unit in Skardu taught us

Before drawing a single line of our own facility, we wanted to stand inside one that already works.

Mr. Akbar Shah runs a sea buckthorn processing unit in Skardu. When we asked whether we could come and look around, he said yes without hesitation, and that generosity set the tone for everything that followed. Plans on paper can tell you a great deal about a building. They cannot tell you how a room feels when it is working, where people stand, or which corner the crates end up piled in because there was nowhere else to put them.

The first thing you notice is the colour. Rows of plastic bottles stand in crates, filled with a juice somewhere between apricot and saffron, and beside them sit jars of jam with gold lids and printed labels, ready to leave. It is a quietly persuasive sight. Here, in Baltistan, a berry that is still mostly left on the branch has already been turned into something you can put on a shop shelf.





Jam and juice from the Skardu unit, bottled beside the processing line.

The machines

Further in, the machines explain how the berries get there. There is a stainless steel pulper, a long steel vessel on a frame, and a small screw press of the kind more often seen pressing oil from apricot kernels. None of it is grand. Most of it would fit in a village workshop. That was, in its own way, the most useful lesson of the morning: a processing unit in these mountains does not need to look like a factory to work.

On one wall hung a poster from a machinery maker, Joshan Engineering Works, showing a hydraulic press, a mixing vessel and several other pieces of equipment. We photographed it, as visitors tend to do, and then found ourselves looking at it again later. The machines themselves can be bought. The harder questions are which ones, at what size, and who will be there to repair them when something goes wrong in the middle of the harvest.



Left: processing equipment at the unit. Right: the small screw press.

The dryer

The part of the unit we kept returning to was outside. Mr. Akbar Shah dries his material in a greenhouse-style structure of clear panels, with racks and trays stacked on several levels inside and ventilation fans set high in the frame to keep the air moving. It is simple, and it is clever. In a region where the electricity supply can fail for long stretches, a dryer that works on sunlight and moving air is not a nice addition. It is part of what makes the whole operation possible.

Beside it stands a second dryer, an arched tunnel of polycarbonate sheeting with a bank of fans at one end. Inside, the racks were mostly bare, waiting for the season, but a tray of seeds had been spread out to dry. Between the two structures you can see the whole idea at small scale: fruit and seed moved off the branch, out of the weather, and dried slowly enough to keep what makes them valuable.





The greenhouse-style dryer, and one of the ventilation fans at the top of its frame.





Inside the two dryers: tiers of racks under the glass, and seeds laid out on a tray in the tunnel dryer.

What we brought home

Babbar Ali Khan, who leads our governance and contracting, walked the unit with Muhammad Saeed, the solar energy consultant who advises us on power. They were not there to copy anything. They were there to learn proportions: where the berries arrive, how far they travel through the room, where the finished product waits, how much space a dryer really needs. These things are hard to get right on a drawing and obvious the moment you see them in a working space.





Recording the unit: photographing the dryer from outside, and a walk through the processing rooms, past a tilting cooking vessel.

The Skardu unit has since become our practical benchmark. Every machine we consider for the facility in Ghulkin is now measured against what we saw there: its capacity, its specifications, and whether it is suited to a berry whose seeds are as hard as sea buckthorn's. Nothing will be bought until those questions have proper answers.

We left with a clearer picture of what a working unit looks like in these mountains, a list of questions that is longer than the one we arrived with, and a host who was happy to show us all of it. We are grateful to Mr. Akbar Shah for his time and his openness.

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