How a small group of people are restoring the native papermaking traditions of the world's highest country

The very first person the group spoke to was an old man. His eyes lit up as he pointed at himself and said, "Sure, I've seen those kinds of moulds before. I use them myself to make paper." Stunned by the man's revelation, Paper Road quickly accepted his invitation to follow him home for a cup of tea and a demonstration of hand papermaking.

As it turned out, the old man, whose name "Skog Khog" is meant to sound like the cry of an eagle, had taught his sons and grandsons the ancient art of making paper out of the root re-lcags-pa.

Canary carefully documented each step of the process and brought home many samples of both the root and the paper made from it. Paper experts at the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress, and the New-ark Museum have all expressed interest in seeing the revival of handmade Tibetan paper.

Inspired by the good fortune they encountered on their first effort to trace Tibetan papermaking traditions, Canary and his friends have worked continuously over the last year to raise funds for another trip to Tibet. The group is planning to host a papermaking workshop in Lhasa this coming August. And, they've already invited Skog Khog to teach his craft to a new group of Tibetans who will be able to carry on the age-old tradition.

In the old days, Skog Khog used to pay his taxes to the Tibetan theocracy not with money but with paper. Tibetan Buddhists used the paper to print sacred writings. Today, the monks are Skog Khog's biggest customers, and they have agreed to come to Lhasa to attend Paper Road's papermaking workshop.

Paper Road is designing some paper products which can be made by the Tibetans using both re-lcags-pa and fibers from trash left behind by tourists. The group hopes that the new Tibetan papermakers will one day be able to sell their paper wares in the West.

In the meantime, Canary is busy with fund-raising. He figures that the August trip to Tibet will cost his group upwards of US$45,000.

— J. W.