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Entrepreneur Hopes to Turn Mud Into Gold

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) -- Lauren Padawer's inspiration for a beauty product made of glacial mud struck during a grungy rafting trip down the Copper River.

After days of paddling in south central Alaska, Padawer and her companions needed to get clean. Washing herself in the river's glacial pools, Padawer looked down at the mud swirling around her feet and saw opportunity.

"You would just lather yourself with this stuff," said Padawer. "It is about as luscious mud bath quality as you can find anywhere in the world,"

The experience of a mud bath in one of the most beautiful, wild spots on the planet was better than any spa, and the mud was better, too, said Padawer, a 28-year-old from Cordova, a fishing town at the southeastern end of [Prince William Sound](#).

Padawer got an idea. With more than 20 glaciers depositing 100 million tons of glacial silt a year on the 700,000-acre Copper River delta practically in her back yard, why not market the silky mud?

She was equipped with little more than an idea and big dreams when she began developing the Alaska Glacial Mud Co. two years ago. By this Christmas shopping season she hopes to have the company's signature product -- The Glacial Facial -- ready for sale.

Julie Keller, editor-in-chief of American Spa magazine, said Padawer's timing is right.

"There is an enormous market for beauty products featuring natural and organic ingredients," she said. "The market is getting increasingly competitive, however, so a product manufacturer with distinctive, quality products and a unique story has a greater probability of finding success."

Padawer makes ends meet in her town 150 miles southeast of Anchorage by repairing gill nets and making jewelry. If she was going to sell a product, it would have to be a sustainable resource, obtained without hurting the environment or people, she said.

Copper River Delta glacial silt was perfect.

The watershed is about the size of West Virginia and has only about 10,000 people living in it, with no mines, no factories and no commercial farming.

The company's Web site says the Copper River Delta mud is like no other.

"What you have is one of the most pristine mineral-rich glacial mud deposits in the world," Padawer said.

Padawer's fledgeling company is for now a hands-on operation. She's collected some of the mud herself in 5-gallon buckets. It's hard work, especially that she's 5 feet, 5 inches and 135 pounds.

"I fill up the buckets and carry them, but there is a pretty steep incline back up to the vehicles. That is very challenging," she said.

A method that proved better was borrowing a friend's four-wheeler and trailer. She was able to do two loads, carrying 11 buckets each time.

Stephen Barnes, who lent the trailer and four-wheeler and volunteered his labor, said the buckets are hard to carry when full. Even without help, however, he said Padawer would prevail.

"I think she is, you know, the type of person who has the ability to stick with something like this and make it work," Barnes said.

When Glacial Facial is ready for sale, the 50-year-old salmon fisherman said he won't hesitate to try it.

"I know where it comes from. It's good stuff. I have used it in the raw," Barnes said.

"Everybody gets a little glacier mud on them once in a while."

Padawer's goal is to stockpile 50 buckets of mud, or about 2,500 pounds of processed mud, by October. That way she estimates she will have enough material to fill 5,000, 2 1/2-ounce jars when the company begins production this fall.

For now, Padawer is drying the mud in a friend's pottery kiln and working with a cosmetic chemistry lab to formulate the final product. There are many factors to consider, including skin sensitivity, shelf stability, texture consistency and what preservatives to use. She has decided that the final product likely will be unscented and incorporate Pacific Northwest botanicals, such as chamomile, horse tail, elder flower, nettle, seaweed extract and kelp.

Stella Josephine, director of the BUY Alaska program formed in 1991 to encourage people to buy local products, said Padawer has the drive to make her business a success.

"It has passion behind it," Josephine said.

When the time is right, Josephine will help Padawer line up buyers in the multibillion dollar cosmetics industry. She sees Glacial Facial being sold out of hotel salons and perhaps even major upscale retailers. There could be opportunities aboard the cruise ships that visit Alaska, she said.

"I think Alaska has so much mystique and we do have pure products," Josephine said. "She really has lots of different ways to go."

On the Net:

www.alaskaglacialmud.com

www.buyalaska.com

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