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International trade in reptiles booms

New report examines the US connection

International trade in live reptiles has increased dramatically in the last decade, with the USA as the central player. The trade supplies a number of markets, from food to aquariums and zoos, but by far the most significant market is for live reptiles as pets.

In the USA, imports significantly declined after the passage of laws such as the US Endangered Species Act in the 1970s. However, in the last 10 years, the USA has seen an enormous increase in live reptile imports and has become a major supplier as well.

Today, the USA accounts for 82 per cent of the reported international trade in live reptiles covered under CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, according to a new study by TRAFFIC North America. The study, published in the report [*The US Role in the International Live Reptile Trade: Amazon Tree Boas to Zululand Dwarf Chameleons*](#) by Craig Hoover, analyzed global trade data and reviewed trade in approximately 100 species, many covered under CITES.

The findings indicate that the USA is now the world's largest consumer of live reptiles for the pet industry, importing 2.5 million reptiles annually in recent years. A single species, the Green Iguana from Central and South America, accounted for 45 per cent of the imports in 1995.

US exports are also dominated by one species, the US native Red-eared Slider Turtle. This turtle continually makes up more than 80 per cent of the eight to 10 million reptiles exported annually. The majority of Red-eared Slider Turtles are produced on farms, but it is unclear how much wild stock is needed to sustain these farms and therefore what impact they may have upon wild populations. Red-eared Slider Turtle exports have also caused great concern because of the turtle's potential threat as an invasive species that may out-compete native turtle populations. It has been introduced to Africa, Asia, the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Imports to the European Union have since been banned.

Other live reptile species featured prominently in US trade include Ball Pythons, Boa Constrictors, Savannah Monitor Lizards and two species of map

turtles, *Graptemys geographica* and *G. pseudogeographica*.

Although the USA has long monitored and regulated wildlife trade, it has focused its efforts largely on the import of foreign species rather than the export of native species. The trade in US native turtle species may be of particular concern. It supplies two very different markets: the pet trade nearly throughout the world, and the food market, primarily in East and Southeast Asia. The available data indicate the exported number of map turtles alone jumped from less than 10 000 in 1990 to at least 80 000 in both 1995 and 1996, but some of the rise could be due to better recording at the genus level than in previous years.

While legal international trade in live reptiles is on the rise, the study found illegal trade increasing as well, particularly in protected Australian and Madagascan reptiles such as pythons, chameleons and monitor lizards.

The report recommends a variety of actions, including an examination of international trade in North American turtles and turtle farming operations to assess their potential effects on wild populations, and review of legislation to assess effectiveness of implementation and enforcement in identified "hot spots" where reptile species continue to be threatened by trade.

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TRAFFIC Oceania to co-host second TEAM meeting

Due to the overwhelming success of the first symposium on traditional East Asian medicine (TEAM) and wildlife conservation held in Sydney, Australia last year, TRAFFIC Oceania will be co-hosting a second symposium in Melbourne in November 1998.

The second Healthy People, Healthy Wildlife symposium will be co-hosted by TRAFFIC Oceania, Environment Australia and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). It will be held at RMIT.

Like the first event, which attracted more than 160 people, this symposium will aim to increase understanding between the Government regulatory authorities and traditional medicine communities. Just as important, it aims to increase awareness among the traditional medicine community of wildlife conservation issues, relevant legislation and potential alternatives.

Speakers will include Senator Robert Hill, the Federal Environment Minister; David Kay, Assistant Secretary of Environment Australia; the Secretary of the Australia Chinese Medicine and Research Council; and Samuel Lee from TRAFFIC East Asia.

The first symposium was held in August 1997 in conjunction with the University of Western Sydney and Environment Australia. It developed in response to a 1995 TRAFFIC Oceania report that documented an active market in both Australia and New Zealand for illegally imported medicines claiming to contain parts of endangered and threatened wildlife, such as bear, leopard and Tiger.

In Australia, the importation of endangered and threatened species' medicines is regulated and in some cases banned, but large amounts had been illegally imported and offered for sale, despite the enforcement efforts at the borders. Between June 1991 and March 1995, for example, more than 40 000 illicit medicines had been seized by enforcement authorities.

The report, *Of Tiger Treatment and Rhino Remedies: trade in endangered species medicines in Australia and New Zealand*, recommended a variety of actions, including a government awareness campaign for the TEAM community in Australia. The practice of traditional East Asian medicine is flourishing in Australia. It is estimated that there are about 4500 practitioners,

a number expected to significantly increase in the coming years.

TRAFFIC first began co-hosting or organizing such events in East Asia in 1995 as part of its pioneering approach of working directly with traditional medicine communities to foster their understanding of conservation issues.

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Symposium addresses Europe's vast trade in medicinal plants

More than 120 people attended the [First International Symposium on the Conservation of Medicinal Plants in Trade in Europe](#), which was organized by TRAFFIC in June 1998 at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in the United Kingdom.

As the first event of its kind to focus on European trade in medicinal plants, the event attracted a diversity of participants, including government officials, industry representatives, plant specialists, and conservationists.

Organized in collaboration with WWF, the IUCN/SSC Medicinal Plant Specialist Group and Kew Gardens, the symposium followed the release of a new TRAFFIC Europe *Species in Danger* report identifying 150 native European plant species that could be at risk in one or several countries from over-collection in the wild.

The report, [Europe's Medicinal and Aromatic Plants: Their Use, Trade and Conservation](#) by Dagmar Lange, documents how the vast majority of the at least 1200-1300 European medicinal and aromatic plants used on a commercial basis every year are still taken directly from the wild. One alarming trend is that conservation efforts have usually begun only after a species becomes threatened.

One native European species, Pheasant's Eye *Adonis vernalis*, is already extinct in Italy and the Netherlands and is now considered vulnerable to extinction in Germany, Slovakia, Sweden and Switzerland. The aerial parts of this plant are used in remedies to treat chronic cardiac problems and as a tranquilizer. The TRAFFIC Network recommends that European countries should consider whether this species would meet the criteria for international trade controls.

The symposium also focused upon exotic medicinal species in trade in Europe, such as Devil's Claw *Harpagophytum procumbens*. The roots of this native African species are used to treat chronic rheumatic disorders. In Namibia, its harvest has often been destructive and uncontrolled.

TRAFFIC Europe will produce and publish symposium proceedings later this year.

Funding for this symposium was donated by the Rufford Foundation; the UK Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions; and the Bundesamt für Naturschutz.

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Shahtoosh: the lethal cost of luxury

by Julie Gaw, Research Consultant, TRAFFIC East Asia

Unravelling trade in Tibetan Antelope wool

The wool of the Tibetan Antelope or Chiru *Pantholops hodgsonii* has become a "must have" item among the rich and famous worldwide, despite the animal's protected status and a 23-year-old international trade ban. Known as shahtoosh, the wool is the finest and most expensive in the world.

TRAFFIC staff in East Asia, India and other parts of the world research and investigate the shahtoosh trade, from its starting point on the high steppes of China—home to the last major herds of Tibetan Antelope—to its end-use consumers—the wealthy elite of Hong Kong, Milan, London, New York and other major cities.

As part of this research, TRAFFIC offices are collaborating with relevant government authorities in China and India, as well as the Hong Kong-based China Exploration and Research Society (CERS).

With assistance from TRAFFIC East Asia, Hong Kong authorities in December 1997 made the world's largest seizure of shahtoosh shawls. On 18 December, officers of Hong Kong's CITES Management Authority confiscated 186 shahtoosh shawls, which were being sold at a private exhibition and in local retail shops. The outcomes of the resulting prosecutions are pending.

Although the sale of shahtoosh violates Hong Kong law, the trade had become so blatant in this Special Administrative Region of China that in December 1997 at least one upscale boutique was displaying its shawls openly in a front window.

Shahtoosh shawls have also been seized in the UK, India and elsewhere. Despite the unprecedented and well publicised seizures, the Tibetan Antelope continues to face grave threats from demand for shahtoosh.

Known as Chiru in its home range on the remote Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau of China, the Tibetan Antelope lives at altitudes between 3700 and 5500 metres, with some animals venturing into the Ladakh region of India. More closely related to sheep and goats than to other antelope species, Tibetan Antelope

have developed a super-fine layer of hair to protect against the harsh plateau environment, where temperatures can dip to 40 degrees below zero. The burgeoning demand for this unique wool may prove to be the undoing of the world's remaining Tibetan Antelope.

This antelope has been listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) since 1975. The animal and its parts and derivatives are therefore banned from international trade except in exceptional circumstances. Today, the number of Tibetan Antelope is estimated to be no more than 75 000, and there is evidence of populations declining. IUCN classifies the Tibetan Antelope as vulnerable to extinction.



Photo: Wong How Man/China Exploration and Research Society

Poaching remains: Tibetan Antelope killed and then skinned by poachers for their fine hair, which is plucked from the hide and then woven into shahtoosh.

In some of China's remotest areas, well-armed poachers are tracking Tibetan Antelope to harvest their skin for their hair, each strand of which is said to be six-and-a-half times thinner than a human hair. The skins are often smuggled via various mountain passes into India, where the hair is removed and then woven into shahtoosh, which means literally "the king of wools".

Unlike domestic goats, the hair of which is harvested by shearing or combing, Tibetan Antelope are killed so their fine hairs can be plucked from the hide. This killing has decimated entire herds in recent years, according to biologists and Chinese government authorities.

Each Tibetan Antelope yields around 125 to 150 grams (4.375-5.25 oz) of this coveted wool. To make a woman's shawl of around two metres long by one metre wide requires some 350 grams (12.25 oz) of wool, which would represent the product from about three Tibetan Antelope. For men, a "doshala" measuring three metres long by one and a half metres wide would require the hair of about five Tibetan Antelope. Middlemen are believed to

pay the poachers up to US\$100 per hide, while the finished product retails in Hong Kong and other international fashion centres for US\$2000 to US\$5000.

The challenges to those working to stop poaching and illegal trade are many. For example, the vast and largely uninhabited regions where Tibetan Antelope live are extremely difficult to patrol, and poaching appears to have dramatically increased in recent years.

In addition, whereas nomads once hunted these antelope with wooden leg-hold traps and antiquated rifles, poachers are now usually better armed than the patrols sent to intercept them. Some deadly shoot-outs have resulted.

According to Wong How Man, President of CERS and Chief Advisor to the Arjin Mountain Nature Reserve, the poachers operate in organized, sophisticated hunting expeditions. These involve truck and jeep convoys, with their own petrol, food supplies and militia. The poachers often use spotlights to hunt at night, freezing the antelope in beams of light before gunning them down en masse.

Poachers have also taken to killing entire herds of female Tibetan Antelope migrating northwards to favoured birthing grounds in June and July. According to Wong, who has observed these antelope in the wild since 1985, he recently discovered a previously unknown birthing ground for Tibetan Antelope on the western fringe of Tibet. But poachers were ahead of his expedition by a couple days, and Wong found more than 70 pregnant antelopes killed and skinned, almost all with full-term foetus.

In the past, Tibetan Antelope poachers favoured males, since females lack horns that would also be harvested for use in traditional East Asian medicine. Recent evidence also suggests that poaching has expanded from a winter activity that saw Tibetan Antelope hair at its thickest and finest, to a year-round activity, despite less hair yield per animal in summer.

Meanwhile, retailers continue to offer shahtoosh shawls in major cities, in high-end boutiques and even over the Internet. Some merchants and many owners remain unaware of the origins of their shahtoosh shawls and the threat they pose to this vulnerable species. Others are fully aware of the truth but insist shahtoosh is derived from shy "mountain goats" or "ibex" which rub their chins and necks on high-altitude bushes, leaving clumps of fine wool behind. Then, as the story goes, Tibetan and Nepali herdsmen painstakingly gather enough wool from these bushes to make shahtoosh shawls. In fact, there are no bushes or shrubs on the high plateau where Tibetan Antelope live. Some Kashmiri traders tell tales of the rare "toosh" bird and its fine, downy feathers being the source of shahtoosh.

There are two main substitutes for shahtoosh on the market. Known as pashmina and shahmina, they are made from the wool of domestic goats in the Himalayas. It is important to note, however, that shahtoosh has been smuggled under the name pashmina. For consumers, the best indicator of the wool origin is often price. Where a shahtoosh shawl or a shawl containing a

shahtoosh mix will cost well over US\$1000, pashmina or shahmina are normally sold for US\$300-500.

In documenting the realities of the shahtoosh trade from the remote reaches of China to the world's fashion elite, the TRAFFIC Network hopes to assist enforcement authorities, encourage better anti-poaching efforts and discourage shahtoosh traders and buyers from indulging in the demand that is driving poaching and the demise of the Tibetan Antelope.

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Southeast Asia: A wildlife emporium

The challenge

Southeast Asia is a major hub of trade in wildlife, functioning as supplier, consumer and an emporium of plants, animals and their derivatives.

"Nearly all the major taxonomic groups of plants and animals found within this biodiverse area are traded, both within and outside the region," said Chen Hin Keong, Director of TRAFFIC Southeast Asia. "Some of the more important wildlife products in trade are timber, reptile skins, plant extracts, and live birds."



Photo: TRAFFIC Southeast Asia

Deep-fried munias (rice birds) on sale opposite the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Southeast Asia is one of the more densely populated regions in the world: Indonesia alone is home to nearly 200 million people. The region comprises some of the world's poorest countries as well as some of the most rapidly developing. In poorer areas, the rich, natural bounty is widely exploited by communities, some just to eke out an existence. In contrast, greater affluence in rapidly developing areas has led to higher purchasing power for wildlife products.

As a result of high levels of wildlife consumerism, unsustainable rates of harvesting are threatening species that were once plentiful and bringing many already endangered species ever closer to the brink of extinction.

One positive sign is that Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam are members of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Only one country in the region, Lao PDR, has yet to join.

But these countries face problems in implementing and enforcing CITES. Weak permit systems, a lack of CITES

enforcement staff, inadequate legislation at the national level, poor coordination between departments, and widespread illicit trade are just some of these difficulties.



Photo: TRAFFIC Southeast Asia

Clouded Leopard and Leopard skins on sale in Myanmar

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Our role

TRAFFIC Southeast Asia is part of the the worldwide network of 20 TRAFFIC offices. TRAFFIC aims to ensure that trade in wild plants and animals does not exceed sustainable levels, and is in accordance with national laws and international treaties.

TRAFFIC has four areas of focus: medicinal wildlife trade; trade in timber and other wood products; fisheries products in trade; and promoting the effectiveness of CITES and other wildlife trade controls.

The Southeast Asia regional office is based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It works in three main sub-areas: the Greater Mekong comprising Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam; Island nations (the Philippines and Indonesia); and other countries (Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore).

These pages illustrate how TRAFFIC Southeast Asia works. Partnerships are key. Curtailing unsustainable or illicit wildlife trade cannot be done in isolation. TRAFFIC works with national authorities, Customs and police officials, the commercial sector, local communities and other non-governmental organizations to help meet the conservation challenges and strive for solutions that work in this remarkable region of Southeast Asia.

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Southeast Asia: A wildlife emporium

Joining hands in Indonesia

Strong economic incentives, lack of enforcement and low environmental awareness has led to epidemic wildlife trade in Indonesia. With over 13 000 islands stretching over a length of 5600km, helping to avoid over-exploitation of Indonesia's rich wildlife resources cannot be a single-handed task.

In conjunction with the WWF Indonesia Programme, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia is leading a networking programme in Indonesia to help strengthen wildlife trade monitoring efforts and implementation of national and international trade controls. Starting with a core group of five non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the aim is to also build closer inter-island links and promote awareness.



Photo: Steven Broad/TRAFFIC

Orchid collection. An Indonesian boy takes a break from collecting wild orchids on the active volcano Mount Batur in Bali, Indonesia

The core group has adopted several trade monitoring measures with clear commitments. It is headed by a Secretariat at WWF Indonesia that will

facilitate a working group on wildlife trade issues and provide fundraising assistance by way of small grants. TRAFFIC and WWF Indonesia staff oversee the design, development, fundraising and implementation of this initiative and serve as liaison with the Indonesian authorities responsible for wildlife trade.

The different NGOs, in turn, will build upon and pool their own specific strengths, skills, areas of expertise, experience and audiences to bring conservation messages to the general public and communities.

It is hoped that this partnership will provide opportunities and resources to assist Indonesian authorities in their efforts to combat illegal wildlife trade.

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Southeast Asia: A wildlife emporium

Assisting CITES Implementation in Vietnam

Vietnam has long been an important centre of wildlife trade in Southeast Asia. The trade is both for the domestic market and export and covers a wide range of species, from Tigers and rhinoceroses, to birds and seahorses.

In the case of the Tiger, TRAFFIC found that one shop alone in Ho Chi Minh city obtained 10 Tiger skeletons a year in the early 1990s. The most recent statistics available now indicate that there may be only 200 Tigers remaining in the country.

In addition, trade in other wildlife, such as fishes, reptiles and amphibians may pose an urgent threat to many species. At the same time, wildlife continues to provide basic resources for Vietnamese people. Surveys have found meat from Sambar, Wild Pig, civets, turtles, tortoises, lizards and snakes widely sold in cities and towns throughout the country.



Photo: Steven Broad/TRAFFIC

Fortunately, Vietnam joined CITES in 1994, pledging to strengthen its control of wildlife trade and allowing it to call upon other CITESmember countries to help detect and prevent illicit international trade in Vietnam's native wild plants and animals.

TRAFFIC Southeast Asia is now assisting the relevant government agencies in Vietnam to implement and enforce CITES provisions effectively. The assistance will include technical advice on policy development and planning, management, capacity-building and implementation issues.

TRAFFIC Southeast Asia is raising funds to place a TRAFFIC advisor in Vietnam to help set up a working implementation system and advise the relevant agencies on administrative systems, wildlife trade legislation and anti-smuggling initiatives.

One critical need is to assist in the creation of a dedicated CITES Management Unit that would lead implementation and liaise with the CITES Secretariat and other CITES member countries on CITES matters.

Partnerships and co-operation are particularly important. It is vital for local enforcement agencies, traders, entrepreneurs and consumers to work together to ensure sustainable harvest and use of wildlife. Legislation alone will not change behaviour. Awareness campaigns are a crucial component to enforcement efforts.

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Southeast Asia: A wildlife emporium

Is Southeast Asia fishing its reefs to death?

How much would you spend to treat yourself to a fresh steamed grouper in a restaurant? If you live in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, you would probably spend about RM40-RM60 (US\$10-15). But the cost of bringing that one fish live to the restaurant far exceeds its menu price.



The demand for grouper and other coral reef fish has led to their over-exploitation and depletion. This and the destructive fishing methods used are damaging coral reef ecosystems and causing significant losses to economies, the fishing industry and the coastal communities that rely upon these fish for their livelihoods.

The practice of catching coral reef fish and supplying them live to local and overseas markets started in Southeast Asia during the 1980s and has since cast its net to the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. Originally, trade expanded rapidly to meet demand from Hong Kong. More recently, rising affluence in Singapore, China and Malaysia caused exports to soar. Exports of live coral reef fish from the region's largest suppliers—Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia—increased markedly from the late 1980s until the early 1990s.

But could the boom be over? Initial findings from TRAFFIC studies in the Philippines and Malaysia suggest that export volumes declined in 1996, the

most recent year for which data are available. This decline could suggest dwindling fish stocks. Like other wildlife resources, marine fish stocks can be maintained only if harvested at a sustainable rate.

The potential for overfishing is high. This is particularly true in less developed countries, where the situation is aggravated by the existing impoverishment of many fishers and the high incomes that can be derived from harvesting live reef fish. The growth of the live reef fish industry has been likened to that of a gold rush.

Data from the countries surveyed indicate that government regulations and enforcement are insufficient to prevent overfishing. In addition, destructive fishing methods such as the use of cyanide are causing wide devastation to coral reefs, the prime breeding and feeding grounds for most of the region's fish. The use of cyanide, which stupefies the fish, not only kills and injures invertebrates, corals and fish, but can also cause health problems for the fishers and consumers alike.

Co-operation between governments, industry and others is essential to ensure conservation of coral reef fish and their marine ecosystems. A report on TRAFFIC's studies of the live reef fish food trade in both Southeast and East Asia will be published later this year to encourage remedial action.

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Southeast Asia: A wildlife emporium

Good fortune fish may soon be out of luck

The Asian Bonytongue or Asian Arowana *Scleropages formosus* is probably one of the most expensive freshwater, ornamental fish in the world. With its brightly coloured scales and barbels at the tip of its mouth, it is also known as the Dragon Fish and thought of as a reincarnation of the Divinity Dragon, a powerful guardian against evil.

Some Chinese believe this fish has the power to ward off evil, in addition to bringing luck and fortune. The red-coloured Asian Arowana, said to be the most powerful of all, is more in demand than others and consequently ranks as one of the most expensive aquarium fish in the world.

The increasing scarcity of this fish is another factor in its price tag. The rarer the fish, the more expensive it becomes and the more enhanced the owner's status. This popularity has led to extensive illicit trade. The Asian Arowana is a protected species in Malaysia and has long been listed in CITES Appendix I, which prohibits international trade except in special circumstances. For example, captive-bred fish may be traded if specimens are tagged with a glass-covered microchip inserted under the skin that can be read by a scanner. Proper CITES permits and a certificate with the microchip number must also accompany each fish.

Today, there is growing concern about illegal trade in the Asian Arowana in Peninsular Malaysia, which serves as an important transit point for both imports and exports.

Initial TRAFFIC surveys to learn the extent of illicit trade in Peninsular Malaysia indicate that this fish is smuggled in from Indonesia and sold to foreigners or to local traders. Although there is some demand for the fish in Malaysia, most imported into the country are re-exported to further destinations, such as Thailand, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The latter is believed to be the largest market for Asian Arowana.

The full findings of TRAFFIC Southeast Asia's surveys of illegal trade in Peninsular Malaysia will be shared with enforcement authorities and are expected to be published later this year.

Illegal trade in this fish could be curbed with tighter security and stricter enforcement. Otherwise this remarkable fish may soon go the way of its dragon namesake.

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The benefits of collaboration

Better data for better decisions

While research forms the core of TRAFFIC's work, analysis and communication of the findings is the key to effective conservation action. Also crucial is the integration of TRAFFIC's research results with information from other sources to form a comprehensive picture of the impact of trade on biodiversity.

As TRAFFIC North America's recent research on American Ginseng *Panax quinquefolius* demonstrated, harvest and trade information are very important but nevertheless only two pieces of a much larger conservation puzzle. Information on the biological and legal status of American Ginseng was needed to assess the potential threat of the trade to wild Ginseng populations. This information was provided to TRAFFIC by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), which maintains data on the biological and conservation status of North American species.

TRAFFIC and TNC are currently exchanging information on other North American medicinal plants, working together to identify potential threats posed by the medicinal trade.

Information exchange of this sort is not new to TRAFFIC. For example, TRAFFIC has collaborated with the IUCN Species Survival Commission (IUCN/SSC) to combine biological status and trade information for more than 20 years. What is new is the explosion in information management and communications technology, and the resulting opportunities for faster and more effective integration and use of information and expertise.

TRAFFIC and 11 other conservation programmes and organizations have formed a global partnership to harness the opportunities. This initiative is known as [BCIS, the Biodiversity Conservation Information System](#).

BCIS members agree to support environmentally sound decision-making and action affecting the status of biodiversity and landscapes at all levels by co-operating in provision of data, information, advice and other services.

The initiative's members represent a broad spectrum of the conservation community, from the biological expertise of IUCN/SSC and BirdLife International to the legal background of the IUCN Environmental Law Programme and the World Conservation Monitoring Centre's experience in

information management

In conjunction with being one of the BCIS members, TRAFFIC has committed to improving management of trade-related data and information throughout the TRAFFIC Network. The aim is to increase TRAFFIC's ability to fulfil its own mission and contribute to the partnership's goals.

A review of the current standards of information technology used by TRAFFIC offices is under way as a first step to developing an information management strategy and action plan. Other BCIS partners are assisting by providing advice and expertise.

The Ginseng example illustrates the potential of BCIS to assist in the conservation of medicinal plants through more effective management, integration and communication of information. BCIS partners recognised this potential during their Steering Committee meeting in July by approving a pilot project, led by TRAFFIC, to examine the role BCIS can play in improving access to information about medicinal plant species.

Funding for the pilot project and for the BCIS secretariat is provided by the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation (NORAD).

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New support for medicinal plants

By Teresa Mulliken, Research and Network Development Manager, TRAFFIC International

Aspirin, ginseng tea, Aloe lotions and gels are simple healthcare remedies used in many parts of the world to treat a variety of illnesses. They all also have a common beginning: wild plants. Aspirin, for instance, owes its origins to the willow tree.

Hippocrates used powder extracted from willow bark to treat pain and reduce fever in the fifth century BC. Over 2000 years later, the chemical compound salicin was isolated from willow bark, the precursor to the active compound found in modern aspirin. Today, it is estimated that more than 80 billion aspirin tablets are used each year in the USA alone. Unlike aspirin, ginseng tea, used to improve vital energy and slow aging, is still produced from the raw product: ginseng roots. However, much of the ginseng in trade is cultivated, as is all of the aloe vera gel found in skincare products and health drinks.

Less well known are the tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of other medicinal plant species used around the world, some of which, like willow trees, have been recognised for their healing properties for thousands of years.

These plants form the basis of health care systems throughout much of the developing world, a source of new compounds on which to base new pharmaceutical products, and a major component of the burgeoning markets for herbal health care remedies and natural products. They also provide a source of income for growers, traders, collectors and manufacturers of plant-based medicines.

In this dual role as a source of healthcare and income, medicinal plants make an important contribution to the larger development process. Unfortunately, however, some plant species of medicinal value are already in short supply, which poses a threat to human welfare and the wild species themselves. Immediate actions are therefore required to ensure harvest and trade of medicinal plant species are conducted sustainably.

TRAFFIC has been working on the medicinal plant trade for many years, including collaboration with important partners such as the IUCN/SSC Medicinal Plant Specialist Group.

Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit, more commonly known as BMZ) is supporting a suite of new actions by TRAFFIC. Through a Funds in Trust Agreement with WWF International, BMZ has pledged DM1 million (US\$560 000) to the TRAFFIC Network's medicinal plant work during 1998-2000. Much of the funding is directed toward regionally focused work in East Asia, the Indian subcontinent and South America.

In addition, BMZ is supporting efforts to build and/or strengthen links with others working on medicinal plant trade issues. It aims to enhance the communication of TRAFFIC's research results to those who need it, from traditional medicine communities to policy makers.

The regional work to be undertaken through BMZ support is as diverse as the medicinal plant trade itself, with each region home to different, but in the case of India and East Asia, overlapping, medicinal traditions.

East Asia

The major traditional medicine systems in this region are derived from traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), which has a history of several thousand years and is well-documented.

Although international attention has been drawn to the use of animal species such as rhinoceros and Tiger in TCM, animal ingredients actually make up less than 20% of those used in TCM. TCM is largely a plant-based medicinal system. It is believed that as many as 1000 plant species are in use for TCM in China and that about 80 per cent of them are taken from the wild. An initial TRAFFIC East Asia study in Hong Kong in 1995/96 revealed a massive trade involving a number of threatened plant species: of the 388 plant species listed in the China Plant Red Data Book, 69 were found to be used in TCM, and 22 of these were in common use.

Through work supported by BMZ, TRAFFIC East Asia seeks to promote the security and conservation of wild plant resources used in traditional medicine in East Asia to support basic health care needs.

TRAFFIC East Asia will convene a series of meetings to promote dialogue and understanding of the links between conservation and medicinal security issues among producers, regulators and medicinal communities.

Other activities planned include the compilation of an overview of the nature of and trends in medicinal plant harvest, propagation and trade in East Asia; identifying species at risk; and reviewing national legislation and policies relevant to production, supply and conservation of medicinal plants. Work will also be undertaken to help build capacity within governments and TCM communities to implement any needed trade controls.

The Indian subcontinent

The Himalayas provide more than a meeting point for China and the Indian subcontinent. They also provide a huge variety and volume of medicinal plants used in TCM, Tibetan medicine, and Ayurved. Like TCM, Ayurved has a long history (over 3000 years), is well-documented, and is widely used both locally and in Asian communities established in other parts of the world. There are also a large number of localised traditional medicine systems.

Harvest of native plants to supply India's own healthcare needs and a growing export market provides an important source of income for local communities. However, demand for plant materials is huge and growing, while many of the region's medicinal plant resources are dwindling. Recent reviews applying IUCN threat criteria found that a significant number of medicinal plant species are threatened or endangered within India. Large quantities of raw medicinal plant materials are also imported into India from neighbouring countries and exported to overseas markets.



Astragalus spp.

A number of organizations within India are concerned with maintaining India's traditional medicine systems. In addition, there is a widespread development network, an established pharmaceutical industry and a wealth of botanical experts in the country. Until now, however, there has been little effort to document the volume and impact of national or international trade in India's medicinal plants.

TRAFFIC India is already well on its way toward establishing working relationships with key stakeholders such as those above and government personnel and toward collecting information required if plants in trade are to be managed on a sustainable basis.

A key challenge within India will be to inform these and other stakeholders of the nature and impact of the medicinal plant trade, and to facilitate their co-operation in developing and implementing measures that will secure the conservation of medicinal plants. Original research will be combined with meetings and workshops to discuss findings and develop workable solutions to any problems identified.

South America

In contrast to East Asia and India, South America's traditional medicine practices are far more localised, with neither the geographic extent or the written texts that characterise TCM and Ayurved. As a result, an important first step is to study and describe the medicinal plant trade in the region, to identify commonly used species, and to begin the process of identifying whether any species are at risk.

Preliminary research in 1996 and 1997 by TRAFFIC International's South America Plants Officer confirmed that, as in Asia, medicinal plants are important components of local health care, are in some cases used unsustainably, and are exported as well as used locally.

BMZ funding is supporting the completion of a regional overview of the medicinal plant trade as well as more detailed studies of individual species in trade, existing trade controls, and the potential role of regional and international treaties in this region. Two species already identified for further research are Cat's Claw *Uncaria tomentosa* and Dragon's Blood *Croton lechleri*.

The results of this research will be shared with governments, traditional healthcare associations and relevant agencies to further raise the profile of medicinal plant trade issues and stimulate discussion and actions necessary to ensure more effective management.



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- IUCN Species Survival Commission
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