

While the trade in wild animals—the illegal and crime-linked components in particular—has risen on policy and practice agendas, far less attention is paid to the challenge arising from harvesting and trade in wild plants. This is particularly true for aromatic, food and medicinal commodities, which remain largely overlooked as “hidden ingredients” in everyday and luxury products. Arguably, this is the wildlife trade that directly affects the largest proportion of people around the world, through consumption of products including herbal teas (e.g. liquorice), chocolate (wild cocoa, shea nuts), carbonated drinks (gum arabic), beauty products (sandalwood oil, frankincense), and medicines (ginseng, hoodia).

EDITORIAL

Estimating the scale of the trade is difficult, as it is often unregulated. Most available statistics do not include figures for the volumes in trade or species composition. It is estimated that 60 000 plant species are used for medicinal purposes around the world, with several thousand traded internationally. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the global value of non-wood forest products (NWFP) of plant and animal origin was estimated as USD20.6 billion in 2010. This is likely a substantial underestimate as NWFPs are rarely captured in national statistics: in a recent International Trade Centre study, the export of plant-based NWFPs from China was estimated at over 1.3 billion kg, with a reported Customs value of over USD5 billion. Trade chains are often complex and difficult to monitor, involving multiple trading and processing companies from the point of harvest to the end products. Surprisingly little attention is paid to the significance of a trade that provides livelihoods to millions.

Every fifth plant species is estimated to be threatened with extinction in the wild, according to IUCN. Just 3% of the world's well-documented medicinal flora has been evaluated for global conservation status, almost half of it as threatened. Plants have been used by humans over millennia and, in that time, they have been pretty resistant to collection pressures. However, the existing and growing market demand creates an important driver of increased harvesting pressure, including in species that were not traded internationally in the past (e.g. for superfoods or cosmetics). For example, there are estimates that the nutritional supplements market globally has grown from USD40 billion to USD96 billion between 1996 and 2012, while the global organic cosmetics market is increasing by 10% annually. Wild plant ingredients, including extracts and essential oils, are important components of such products and are now facing pressures like never before. Companies' marketing strategies often emphasize the “natural” and “wild” properties of the ingredients, but little attention is directed at whether their sourcing is ecologically and socially sustainable.

For wild plant species, there is generally less control and enforcement of legality and sustainability, and a lack of management planning for the majority of species harvested and traded. CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) trade controls can help address the legality and sustainability of

sourcing, but they do not apply to many of the key species in trade. More regulation governing harvesting and trade of wild plants does not always translate into sound resource management—particularly taking into account the interplay with issues of tenure and access rights, traditional use, and the characteristics of products in trade.

Despite these complexities, wild plants in trade can “tell” very positive conservation stories of sustainable use. TRAFFIC works with the FairWild Foundation, IUCN/SSC's Medicinal Plant Specialist Group and others to support implementation of the FairWild Standard, the best practice guidelines for sustainable harvest and equitable trade in wild plants. Under the FairWild certification system, now operational for five years, 24 species have been certified in eight source countries, and over 20 products are now sold on the market labelled as “FairWild”. The scheme is also providing better incomes to local communities through its fair trade approach to over 1000 collectors, including the Samburu people in northern Kenya tapping Frankincense *Boswellia* and *Commiphora* spp. resin, community groups harvesting Ayurveda ingredients in sacred groves in India's Western Ghats, Liquorice *Glycyrrhiza* spp. harvesters in Kazakhstan, Spain and Georgia, and Roma plant collectors in Central/Eastern Europe. This uptake is primarily driven by FairWild's “early adopter” champions in the business sector. Beyond certification, other companies are using the FairWild Standard as a basis for responsible sourcing of wild plants through their internal policies and sourcing practices. This includes some key traditional Chinese medicine manufacturers, which were a focus of a recently completed project in China (see pages 48–50), who are beginning to employ FairWild principles as part of their corporate social responsibility commitment.

Sound decisions on the trade in plants must be based on sound information. The assessment of trade and the threat status of key resources and the development of species and area management plans is needed in all source countries, to guide resource management policies and strategies, and to capture information about harvesting, trade and its impacts on species and people. Balancing rigorous scientific approaches with community-based participatory resource management models is paramount to ensure the engagement of resource owners and users.

With an increasingly strong range of tools now available to help ensure and demonstrate responsible sourcing of wild plants, the key question now is how their use can be expanded to have impact on a much bigger scale. One critical factor is gaining consumer engagement about the sourcing of ingredients that they all too often are unaware of as being part of their daily lives. Perhaps in the same way that concern about illegal trade in wild animals has been prompted by exposure of the impacts on a few charismatic “flagship” species, greater action on trade in wild plants can be motivated by drawing attention to a similar set of iconic wild plant species that can capture greater public attention. This could help drive the sort of innovative partnerships between conservation organizations, consumer associations, companies, and development agencies that are so badly needed to bring this trade out of hiding and motivate more action for people and plants.

Anastasiya Timoshyna, Medicinal Plants Programme Leader, TRAFFIC. E-mail: anastasiya.timoshyna@traffic.org