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Taking action on sustainable wild harvesting: *building relationships, changing markets*

February 2013 saw one of the main events in the annual calendar for efforts to promote the FairWild Standard for sustainable harvest of wild plants. Known as “the place where organic people meet”, the BioFach organic trade fair is an important annual event for those involved in the trade in wild plant ingredients—producers, manufacturers, traders, brokers, NGOs, standard-setters and certifiers alike. This is the fifth year that FairWild Foundation has been present at the fair, and the level of industry interest has been steadily rising.

The FairWild stand proved a useful meeting point for companies interested in sustainable wild collection, hosting meetings between certified operators, new and potential buyers, as well as trouble-shooting sessions for those working on implementing the certification scheme. Industry links were made for TRAFFIC’s project on collection and use of wild plants in Central Europe, and industry interest canvassed for a new project to introduce sustainable harvesting for ingredients from Morocco.

In addition to these direct efforts to promote sustainable sourcing, there was also some time to reflect. Following the theme of the Congress, a session was hosted on “co-operative relationships for wild harvesting”. Through a range of short presentations and a Q&A session, participants explored the challenges that go hand-in-hand with joint actions—sharing first-hand experience from producers, manufacturers, NGOs, and discussing the applicability of the FairWild Standard (and certification scheme) as a framework to guide efforts.



TRAFFIC

TRAFFIC staff representing FairWild Foundation at BioFach, from left: Kristina Rodina, Kahoru Kanari, Anastasiya Timoshyna, Bryony Morgan and Steven Broad.

BioFach event participants discussed how adherence to a set of shared values (sustainable use, social responsibility, and fair trade) can spark co-operative relationships between the different users and stakeholders of wild plants. Examples were drawn from experiences using such principles to stimulate shared commitment to sustainable use and trade. Manufacturing and retailing companies emphasized the significance of the FairWild Standard for their sourcing of wild ingredients. Neal’s Yard Remedies of UK explained past company decisions to discontinue use of some ingredients because of sustainability concerns. FairWild Standard certification provides a framework for sustainable sourcing, which the company plans to test for Frankincense, an aromatic resin obtained from trees of *Boswellia* and similar species and used in a range of popular cosmetic products. Traditional Medicinals Inc. of USA, affirmed the company’s commitment to ensure that 100% of product lines are covered by eco-social certification schemes by 2020. This is underpinned by strong relations with suppliers, and sharing benefits with collectors and communities to ensure that trade is fair and beneficial for all involved. This opinion was shared by one of the suppliers of Traditional Medicinals Inc., Runo sp. z o.o. of Poland, a pioneer of organic certification in Poland. FairWild certification means that collectors receive a 5% higher price for their products, providing incentives to keep the tradition of wild collection alive. TRAFFIC spoke of experiences in supporting market-based approaches to conservation, emphasizing that NGOs can facilitate discussion on the topic in a neutral setting and help make connections in the value chain, share information, and find collaborators. They can also contribute technical expertise, and create consumer draw through awareness-raising efforts. The FairWild Standard provides a valuable reference and tool, but a prerequisite is a common commitment to change, and to invest in developing open and trustful relationships.

Taking time to share knowledge and learn from experience is important. At the IUCN World Conservation Congress in South Korea in September 2012, a Knowledge Café session facilitated by TRAFFIC, the FairWild Foundation, and IUCN Medicinal Plants Specialist Group, similarly focused on the ways development organizations and NGOs can facilitate such establishment of co-operative relations within the wider agenda of supporting livelihoods. Such relationships can develop through different pathways, and from different entry points—linking producers to markets, driving regulatory changes, and introducing sustainability initiatives into existing supply chains.

Encouraging industry leadership on sustainable harvesting now forms the cornerstone of TRAFFIC’s medicinal and aromatic plants trade work. Based on experience over time, the emphasis of the programme has shifted from the producer end of the chain (focusing on priority landscapes and species), to further up the value chain—finding those “change agents” in industry who can help spark a broader change in the market. In the future, the list of stakeholders who need to be brought on board will expand even further, recognizing the role of retailers and consumers in creating demand for sustainable products.

But for now, industry events such as BioFach are firmly on the calendar, providing an important space where voluntary initiatives such as FairWild can take shape among industry leaders, and, it is to be hoped, grow into something much bigger.

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