

Report by Rosa A. Indenbaum and Thuy Nguyen

Products such as teas, lotions, medicines, perfumes and even confectionery use wild medicinal and aromatic plant (MAP) ingredients from countries around the world. However, most people do not know or even consider how many of their day-to-day products contain wild plants, let alone how and from where those ingredients were sourced.

In many source countries, a harvester attempting to make a living from harvesting, supplying and trading wild-collected MAPs is at a disadvantage in comparison to people further along the supply chain. When working alone, the harvesters have less negotiating power for market access and a fair price, and may not necessarily be harvesting sustainably because they need the income within a short timeframe. Additionally, individuals are vulnerable to buyers who may terminate product orders or withhold payments placing in jeopardy the harvester's already low annual income. Meanwhile, harvesting sustainably can provide a steady and reliable income with potentially increased profits; moreover, the harvesters can select the type and volume of MAPs that they know they can sell.

Since 2011, TRAFFIC has been working in northern Viet Nam with the Forest Protection Department (FPD) of Bac Kan province, the provincial law enforcement and resource management agency responsible for forest protection, to promote the sustainable trade of MAPs. This effort has focused not only on the biological sustainability of the MAP resources harvested and traded, but also on seeking equitable business practices between pharmaceutical companies and local harvesters, following the principles of the FairWild Standard—a framework established to guide best practice in sustainable wild-harvesting and equitable trade in wild plants. The FairWild system aims to improve the economic and social position of wild harvesters, through supporting the formation of collectors' associations, ensuring fair pricing and payment of collectors, and

## MEMBERSHIP IN COMMUNITY WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

encouraging the use of transparent cost calculations as the basis of price negotiations. In December 2016–January 2017, a consultant contracted by TRAFFIC evaluated the mid-term impacts of the three-year project, which were summarized in a Mid-Term Evaluation Report. The report demonstrated that this project has fostered a sense of empowerment in the harvesters through teamwork and the strengthening of their ownership over local resources.

As part of the project and driven by the interest of the communities, TRAFFIC facilitated the formation of two local collection co-operatives (formal, certified by the provincial governing body) and 14 local groups (informal, with no legal status) of MAPs harvesters and processors that aim to protect the economic interests of their members and generate positive social changes in the communities. By linking the co-operatives and groups to pharmaceutical companies, local harvesters have gone from sporadic harvesting to planned harvesting periods that align with the marketing and manufacturing plans of the companies.

Almost all the members of the co-operatives and groups are women from the Dao, Tay, Nung and H'Mong ethnic minority groups. During the course of the project, training workshops have been held on practical skills such as sustainable harvesting techniques, MAPs species identification, and book-keeping. The project has brought harvesting techniques in line with the FairWild Standard's sustainability principles, and connected local collectors with pharmaceutical companies in Hanoi who will buy their harvested products, with the aim of increasing and stabilizing the local income from MAPs.

As the project enters its last year, the positive social impacts and economic benefits generated by the co-operatives and groups are becoming even more evident. The community-led co-operatives and groups have empowered local harvesters in many different ways. For example, information collected from interviews with the harvesters showed that there is now greater solidarity amongst villagers and the members have embraced the value of MAPs in their communities, while their increased understanding of market opportunities enables them to be more confident in meetings and in negotiations with companies. Local collectors are also becoming proactively involved in the protection of the MAPs in their own communities, particularly in Nam Xuan Lac Species and Habitat Conservation Area and in Kim Hy Nature Reserve where the collectors are readily co-operating with rangers from the forest protection departments.



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◀ Female collectors en route for training on sustainable harvesting of Jiaogulan *Gynostemma pentaphyllum* and other MAPs, in Khuoi Lung village, Ba Be district.

## CO-OPERATIVES AND GROUPS:



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Location of Bac Kan province (in red), Viet Nam.

The project played a key role in the facilitation of knowledge exchange between the co-operative and group members and companies interested in purchasing MAPs. While the purpose of these knowledge exchanges has been to increase the negotiating skills of—and market access for—the co-operatives and groups, members have simultaneously been empowered by engaging with like-minded people, including harvesters from other provinces and buyers interested in high-quality products. DK Natura, a local pharmaceutical company, has signed long-term contracts with the Bao Chau and the Nam Xuan Lac co-operatives for the medicinal herb *Jiaogulan Gynostemma pentaphyllum*. These multi-year contracts have established a set price for the product and provide a steady income for the co-operative members.

▶ **Training being given on sustainable harvesting and MAPs management practices, Na Leng village, Na Ri district.**

One individual, Mr Huong, the leader of the Nam Xuan Lac group, said that he had never imagined himself to be self-employed from collecting and selling MAPs. After a visit to a pharmaceutical company in another province owned by a local man from the Dao minority, and observing the financial success from the trade in medicinal herbs there, Mr Huong, of the Tay minority, gained confidence in himself and the collectors in his village and is determined to seek the same results for his collector group in Nam Xuan Lac.

The long-lasting impact of this project is closely tied to conveying the importance of sustainability for the target MAPs harvesting communities by also implementing and improving sustainable harvesting skills. In Bac Kan, the co-operative and group members have a renewed sense of ownership over the MAPs in their communes as valuable assets and are consequently promoting the importance of sustainable harvesting, not only for conservation but also for the community itself. The latest review of the project found that the local collectors now believe that they can successfully trade MAPs using sustainable harvesting methods and this will be further monitored and evaluated during the course of the project. The empowerment of the low-income wild-harvesting households from an economic and social perspective is one of the most successful outcomes of the project. It demonstrates how improving sustainable practices and community livelihoods are mutually beneficial and highlights the importance of both the social and economic value derived from these activities.

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