

Future health: sustainable management of **Africa's medicinal plants**



Everything is in place for a huge leap forward in the sustainable management of the medicinal plants supplied by Southern Africa's forests. Policy makers now need to take advantage of sustainable harvesting techniques, new networks of stakeholders, and tremendous popular demand for lasting supplies of medicine.



Above: The huge scale of the medicinal plant trade has just come to light. In Durban's wholesale market, one trader can sell half a tonne of tree bark per month. Photos: J. Wong

Why 'champion' medicinal plants?

Eighty percent of Africans use traditional treatments made from wild native plant species—and one-third depend on them entirely. These plants are mostly harvested from forests. But, as populations rise and forests disappear, over-exploitation is rampant.

If steps aren't taken now to control this overuse, precious forest resources will be lost forever—denying millions of people access to medicines.

The will and the tools needed already exist

There is strong popular demand for better management. A good example is the "Trees for Health Forever" Resolution¹ signed up to by herbalists, traders, foresters, and environment and forest ministry officials from Southern Africa. Plus, scientists are already producing the tools that can make sustainable management a reality.²

Next steps

Policy makers need to support the groups involved and take advantage of new networks (like the Indigenous Resources Working Group in Southern Africa) and the new management approaches available.

They need to ensure that policy includes all stakeholders involved. These include herbalists, travelling wholesalers and local collectors (who gather tonnes of forest products each year), and traders at wholesale markets hundreds of kilometres away from forests—in cities like Durban, Johannesburg and Maputo.

What can policy makers do?

- Recognize that this is a national as well as a regional problem, and one that herbalist associations, traders and foresters feel is important and want to address.
- Ensure that forest-management agreements can encompass *all* the stakeholders involved in the trade and use of forest resources—not just people living close to the forest.
- Recognize that the enormous trade in medicinal plants crosses borders within Southern Africa—often unnoticed—so new joint policies are needed among countries in the region.

¹Workshop Resolution and downloads:

<http://www.wildresources.co.uk/treesforhealth/index.html>

²Project details and handbooks:

http://www.frp.uk.com/project_details.cfm/projectID/8122

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What is the purpose of this brief?

This Policy Brief was produced to show that complex subjects can be explained very quickly and simply to busy policy makers. It is part of a series that showcases proven technologies, policies and new approaches in order to demonstrate the importance of high-quality scientific communication.

Through its Policy Brief and Pocket Guide series, Research into Use aims to encourage partners in both the developed and developing worlds to invest more in their communication efforts. Only in this way will useful technologies be widely adopted, helping the people that they were intended to help and contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

What is Research into Use?

The Research into Use Programme aims to do exactly what its name says—to get research findings into use by resource-poor farmers in the developing world. The natural resources research programmes funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) produced many significant findings over their 11 year existence. Research into Use is working to put these results into practice—in order to reduce poverty on a very broad scale in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

A key part of this work will involve helping partners to better understand how the promotion and widespread use of such research will help to cut poverty and boost economic growth.

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