

Large-scale illegal trade in hundreds of wild-collected ornamental plants in Southeast Asia

September 14 2015

Southeast Asia is a widely recognised centre of illegal wildlife trade – both as the source region for species ranging from seahorses to tigers, and as a global consumer of ivory carvings, wild pets, and traditional Chinese medicinal products.

While there are mounting efforts to tackle [illegal wildlife trade](#), including within Singapore to reduce demand for wildlife products, the [illegal trade](#) in some [species](#) still remains undocumented.

Associate Professor Edward L. Webb, from the Department of Biological Sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and NUS PhD graduate Dr Jacob Phelps, have uncovered a previously little recognised Southeast Asian wildlife [trade](#) – the illegal sale of wild-collected ornamental plants, especially orchids.

Their findings were recently published in the journal *Biological Conservation* in June 2015.

Uncovering the "invisible" orchid trade

The researchers conducted extensive surveys of wildlife markets across Thailand, including border markets with Laos and Myanmar, and identified more than 400 species of ornamental plants in illegal trade – species widely prized by plant enthusiasts for their beauty, fragrance and/or rarity. Over 80% of these plants traded at the markets are wild

orchids. Some of these were even listed in published literature as threatened.

Amazingly, several of the plant species the researchers found in the markets are even new to science – including *Bulbophyllum anodon* and a still undescribed *Thrixperumum* sp. These species were recently featured in WWF's Magical Mekong Report, which highlighted the problems of discovering new species via illegal trade.

Dr Phelps said, "We first visited some of these wild plant markets in Thailand almost 10 years ago, and were amazed by the volume and number of species being traded then. We knew we had to come back to learn more about what was being traded."

Interviews with traders at the markets revealed that most of them sourced the majority of their plants from neighbouring countries, despite domestic protections and restrictions on international orchid trade associated with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The observed trade volumes and richness of plants illegally traded during the survey also greatly exceeded government-reported trade volumes.

In fact, the scientists found that virtually none of the international trade they observed during their field surveys are reflected in official databases, conservation action plans or government policies, even though the trade is occurring openly at public markets across the region.

"In this case, we've simply turned a blind eye to plant trade and botanical conservation", said Dr Phelps, who is currently with the Center for International Forestry Research in Indonesia. "This research highlights a common problem in the illegal [wildlife trade](#) – the invisibility of trades that have not been researched and are not recognised in official government databases."

Amidst growing efforts to tackle the illegal wildlife trade crisis, the NUS researchers call for more attention to protect Southeast Asia's botanical diversity. In their paper, they highlighted the need for more monitoring and enforcement, as well as research to better understand the impact of trade on wild plant populations and the actors involved in illegal trade. They further call for increased awareness of botanical trade among the international initiatives to address wildlife trafficking.

Assoc Prof Webb said, "For many people, plants simply fail to garner our concern and affection in the way that many animals do. While we increasingly hear about the illegal trade of elephant ivory, rhino horn and tiger parts, few people will have heard about the illegal trade in hundreds of plant species for horticulture and medicine. Yet, commercial illegal trade is an immediate threat to the conservation of hundreds, if not thousands, of plant species in our region."

More information: "'Invisible' wildlife trades: Southeast Asia's undocumented illegal trade in wild ornamental plants," *Biological Conservation*, Volume 186, June 2015, Pages 296-305, ISSN 0006-3207, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2015.03.030](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2015.03.030)

Provided by National University of Singapore

Citation: Large-scale illegal trade in hundreds of wild-collected ornamental plants in Southeast Asia (2015, September 14) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-09-large-scale-illegal-hundreds-wild-collected-ornamental.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.