

Report exposes Southeast Asia's illegal orchid trade

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Eria ornata. Credit Jacob Phelps

A thriving and illegal trade in Southeast Asia's threatened and rare orchids is going largely unnoticed in Thailand and across its borders, according to a new report.

The study by the wildlife [trade](#) monitoring network, TRAFFIC, and the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) is based on research by Lancaster University's Dr Jacob Phelps.

Conservative trade figures documented during the study suggest that tens of thousands of orchids are illegally traded across Thailand's borders every year, without either domestic harvest permits or Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) permits, violating range State and international restrictions on wild orchid harvest. Surveys during 2011–2012 in four of the largest wild plant markets in Thailand, including along the country's borders with Myanmar and Lao PDR, recorded 348 species of orchid for sale, representing 13 to 22 percent of the target countries' known orchid flora.

The survey even found significant trade of species from the genus *Paphiopedilum*, all of which are listed in Appendix I of CITES, which bans the international trade of wild-collected specimens.

At least 16 percent of the orchid species observed could be classified under some category of threat or were species found only in small or specific areas. The threat, however, is likely much higher since conservation status assessments have not been conducted for most of the species encountered. Several of the orchids first found in the markets were new to science.

'A Blooming Trade: Illegal trade of ornamental orchids in mainland Southeast Asia' identified Bangkok's Chatuchak market as a regional centre of botanical trade, hosting a large and unique richness of wild plant species, many of them illegally harvested.

"The Chatuchak market has long been notorious as a major hub for the illegal trade in a wide variety of plants and animals—everything from orchids to tortoises, from ivory to eagles," said Dr Chris R. Shepherd,

Regional Director for TRAFFIC in Southeast Asia. "We strongly urge the authorities in Thailand to shut down the illegal trade in this market for good."

Report author Dr Phelps said: "The commercial trade of wild-collected ornamental plants in Southeast Asia is part of a global horticultural trade in beautiful, fragrant and unusual plant species but it has been almost completely overlooked. Despite being among the most protected group of plants in the world, we found clear evidence of an open, illegal trade. It is time to take botanical trade and conservation seriously - alongside efforts to reduce the illegal trades in elephant ivory, rhinoceros horn and pangolin scales. This is no different."

Interviews with plant harvesters, traders and middlemen identified significant illegal international trade from Lao PDR and Myanmar into Thailand, highlighting demand for wild ornamental plants from local and regional sources.

It also revealed complex trade chains involving highly organized middlemen specialized in the orchid and ornamental plant trade. Growing internet based trade and laundering of wild plants via registered commercial greenhouses was observed, as was a medicinal trade in orchids for consumption in Viet Nam and China.

The report calls on Thai government agencies, CITES parties, the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network and conservation organizations to formally recognize the phenomenon, and urgently improve monitoring of not only the trade in charismatic animals [species](#), but also of wild plants.

The author also argues that the considerable implications of the [illegal trade](#) warrant far greater attention from Thailand's CITES management authority for plants, as well as the Department of National Parks,

Wildlife and Plant Conservation and the Royal Forest Department.

More information: A blooming trade: Illegal trade of ornamental orchids in mainland Southeast Asia (Thailand, Lao PDR, Myanmar). [static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f ... L.pdf?token=YeQt5ctv%2FbPNaRO8QJECO1%2BYPNQ%3D](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f...L.pdf?token=YeQt5ctv%2FbPNaRO8QJECO1%2BYPNQ%3D)

Provided by Lancaster University

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