Trade in rare plants on social media must be monitored

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Trade in rare plants on social media must be monitoredPeople buying rare plants through social media are placing species at risk of extinction and must be monitored.A study conducted by the University of Kent's Dr Amy Hinsley and Dr David Roberts, and published by Conservation Biology, represents the first large-scale global survey of wildlife trade via a social-media site, using the orchid trade as a case study. Credit: Dr David Roberts

A study conducted by the University of Kent's Dr Amy Hinsley and Dr David Roberts, and published by *Conservation Biology*, represents the first large-scale global survey of wildlife trade via a social-media site, using the orchid trade as a case study.

Orchids make up 70% of species listed by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and some can sell on the black market for tens of thousands of pounds, thus providing the motivation for traders to bypass the rules aimed at preventing species from becoming extinct. Illegal traders are keen to find new ways to advertise and sell their plants on the black market, with social media emerging as the new way to do so.

The researchers found wild orchids were being traded from all over the world, and recorded trade in rare and threatened species including one assessed as Critically Endangered. At least two others are listed as protected in the country from which they were being sold. Although total numbers of trade posts are relatively small, the high proportion of wild collected orchids for sale supports calls for better monitoring of social media for trade in wild collected plants and other traded wildlife.

A previous study by Dr Hinsley and Dr Roberts shows that orchid hobbyists who buy on the internet have a preference for rare species. The sale of wild orchids on social media, if left unchecked, is likely to contribute to pressure on vulnerable wild populations.

Dr Hinsley and Dr Roberts assert that law enforcers and conservationists must discover, monitor and respond to new developments quickly.

The increasing use of the internet by wildlife traders, especially those involved in illegal trade, is a significant challenge to conservation of traded species especially those in niche markets. Evidence suggests increased regulation, like eBay's ban on ivory sales in 2009, may be

driving wildlife traders to sell via social media.

More information: *Conservation Biology*, dx.doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12721

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