

Researchers shine a spotlight on illegal wild orchid trade

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Orchid. Credit: Dr Jacob Phelps

Large-scale commercial trade of wild orchids is a pressing, but little-recognised conservation problem, according to researchers. Orchids are one of the largest families of flower plants in the world, and they are among the most well-protected.

From edible orchid cake in Tanzania and ornamental orchids in Thailand and Brazil, to medicinal orchids in Nepal, these [plants](#) are highly sought after commodities. The majority of the global orchid trade consists of legal, greenhouse-grown flowers and plants. However, many orchid

[species](#) are also harvested from the wild for local, regional and [international trade](#), without the necessary harvest or trade permits, driving new concern for orchid conservation in many parts of the world.

And a great deal more can be done to protect them from illegal and unsustainable trade, according to the first global overview of the illegal orchid trade, published in the *Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society* by a group of international researchers from the IUCN Species Survival Commission's Orchid Specialist Group – Global Trade Programme .

Dr Jacob Phelps of Lancaster University said: "Orchids have been harvested from the wild for generations, but commercial trade in orchids is often being unreported, and so has garnered little attention. While many people think of orchids as only ornamental plants, orchids are also harvested, grown, and traded globally for use in a range of food products, as constituents within cosmetics, and traditional medicines. This review gives us the first glimpses into the massive scale and diversity of the illegal orchid trade globally, and of the conservation challenges ahead."

Researchers took their review to the CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) meeting in Geneva (26 Nov. - 01 Dec. 2017) with a plea for countries within the CITES Convention to do more to regulate trade of this critical plant group.

Dr Amy Hinsley of the University of Oxford said : "All species of [orchids](#) are listed on the CITES Convention, which sets rules about the international trade of protected species. Orchids represent more than 70% of species covered by the Convention, so we should we be talking more about them."

Researchers say the review provides evidence that efforts to reduce

[illegal wildlife trade](#) are suffering from a distinct case of "plant blindness," and that a great deal more can be done to stop illegal and unsustainable plant trade, and to promote sustainable forms of [trade](#).

More information: Amy Hinsley et al. A review of the trade in orchids and its implications for conservation, *Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/botlinnean/box083](https://doi.org/10.1093/botlinnean/box083)

Provided by Lancaster University

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