

Africa's Mukula trees score a victory as trade is put under closer scrutiny

August 29 2019, by Paolo Omar Cerutti And Nils Bourland



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CITES—the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora – [has decided](#) to include Mukula trees, one of many rosewood species, in its Annex II listing. Species covered by CITES are listed in three Annexes according to how much protection they need. Annex II includes species not directly threatened with extinction, but in which trade must be controlled to ensure their survival. The Conversation Africa's Moina Spooner asked Paolo Cerutti and Nils Bourland about the decision.

Why is Mukula wood so sought after?

Rosewood is an informal term which refers to a group of hardwood species that are red in color and widely used in furniture processing. Historically, the "real" rosewood belonged to the Dalbergia genus as found in Brazil, India or Madagascar. But with time, the name has been commonly used to group strong woods with a reddish color.

Demand for rosewoods has been growing for several years, particularly in Asia. China is one of the biggest rosewood consumers and, since 2000, has established an [official list](#) of [33 tree species](#) harvested across the tropics in Africa (five), Latin America (seven) and Asia (21), and imported and traded under the "Rosewood" name.

The wood fetches very high prices in China as it's used to make [hongmu](#)—antique red-wood furniture. Hongmu was historically used by the imperial elite and is now coveted by China's rising wealthy middle-class.

Because the usual rosewood tree species—like the Dalbergias—have been over-harvested for decades and are now [endangered](#), traders have tried to diversify, using trees which could provide similar colors and strength.

Mukula—*Pterocarpus tinctorius* —is [the local](#) name for rosewood

harvested in Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Mozambique, and Tanzania.

Even though it is not one of the [tree species](#) labeled as "rosewood" under China's official list, traders and consumers still want it for its color and strength. When freshly cut and debarked, Mukula's timber has a bright brown-reddish color—produced by oils and chemicals it contains—which turns to darker brown with time and exposure to light. These oils are also what make the wood durable.

As a result Mukula became part of the [wider rosewood trade](#) that affects much of southeast Asia and parts of Africa and South America.

What was the basis of the CITES decision to control the trade in mukula?

Government seizures of illegally harvested Mukula started to be reported in the media, mostly in Zambia, [about](#) five years ago.

But the seizures didn't stop traders; the volumes harvested and traded increased year after year. Eventually, media and political attention started to flag the negative environmental and socio-economic impacts of the trade, bringing Mukula to the attention of CITES.

Mukula in Zambia mainly [occurs](#) in the country's miombo fragile woodlands. It's an area of great importance for local communities, because it's a [source of](#) livelihoods for them. It also hosts flagship fauna species, including monkeys, that feed on its fruits.

How will the decision now be implemented and which countries does it affect most?

Mukula logs, sawn wood, veneer sheets and plywood are affected by this listing. It is important to remember that this decision doesn't ban the trade of Mukula. Instead, it seeks to increase levels of monitoring so that we can be more and better informed about illegal trade and over-harvesting.

After the decision enters into force, all countries exporting Mukula will have to conduct what is known in CITES as "Non-Detriment Findings." Range States—Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Mozambique, and Tanzania—are immediately concerned.

This means that sustainability, legality and the ability to trace the wood from stump to market must be guaranteed and CITES permits will have to be issued when the species is traded. The permit is issued if it is demonstrated that the traded volume—the number of felled trees—does not threaten the survival of the species at the place of harvest in natural forests. Planted species are not considered.

In addition, the convention requires that exporting and importing countries report to the CITES secretariat, which enters the information into a specific database for global monitoring. The CITES' Plant Committee is then mandated to conduct periodic reviews to detect abnormal situations, for example discrepancies in trade statistics.

There are several other mechanisms which allow irregularities in trade to be monitored at national and international levels. Civil society, NGOs and researchers can also play a great role, drawing attention on unclear situations and illegal activities.

Despite different bans and restrictions Mukula harvest and trade hasn't stopped. What will be the challenges in implementing this decision?

Various timber-producing countries have adopted harvesting and/or trading bans on species of particular socio-economic and environmental value. Yet bans can only be as good as their enforcement and monitoring are. Many countries do adopt bans but not all enforce and monitor their impact. These are sovereign decisions, generally dictated more by the politics of the day than by any serious attempt at understanding their environmental consequences.

Mukula in Zambia is a clear example of this. Multiple bans [have been](#) adopted and lifted in recent years. But these decisions were dictated less by environmental considerations than political ones.

For example, at the beginning of 2016, a "Mukula timber harvesting and movement ban" was issued, then lifted in July 2016, and then reinstated at the beginning of 2017. Yet during all those years, no new assessment was conducted on the ground about the sustainable harvesting levels of Mukula, so traders were able to continue increasing the harvested volumes irrespective of the bans.

The Annex II listing is a great outcome for Mukula. It adds to the force of national decisions, like bans, and makes cheating much more difficult. It also gives it international attention.

But to beat the unsustainable harvesting of rosewoods, we need to aim for even more encompassing solutions. For example, CITES should consider a genus-wide listing which includes—with known exceptions such as *P. soyauxii*—several *Pterocarpus* [species](#), so that traders cannot just as easily move on to the next Rosewood tree and deplete it.

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