

Ecologist suggests wild approach to selling threatened plants

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Hong Liu (left) and her students Haydee Borerro (center) and Jason Downing (right) conduct research in the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park in 2014. Credit: Florida International University

Selling plants could save them from extinction. The key is growing them in their natural habitats, not on private properties or nurseries, according to FIU conservation ecologist Hong Liu.

The goal is to sell some and leave the rest to replenish populations in nature. The restoration-friendly, small-scale cultivation scheme could provide the plants needed for food, medicine, decorations and other uses to customers while generating income for farmers and giving threatened plants a chance at survival, she said.

"We're not calling for the small-scale cultivation of all [threatened species](#)," Liu said. "A lot of times, people take plants that have historical and cultural value. So, nuanced policies are needed that take the plants, the intended-use of the plants and market demand into consideration. If we don't do something, the wild populations will probably go extinct."

The research team led by Liu examined 200 species of plants throughout Canada, China, India, Mexico, the United States and a number of developing nations. Environmental degradation and over-exploitation are the two biggest drivers of plant extinction throughout the world. Plants make up the majority of species on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, the world's most comprehensive [conservation](#) status inventory. Most commercial cultivation studies focus on animals, so Liu says more research must be done on the same concepts for plant conservation.

The study was recently published in *Conservation Biology*. Liu is a researcher in FIU's International Center for Tropical Botany and professor in the Department of Earth and Environment. The International Center for Tropical Botany is dedicated to the conservation and sustainable use of tropical [plants](#) through research, education and outreach. It is a partnership between FIU and the National Tropical Botanical Garden.

More information: Hong Liu et al. Conservation impacts of commercial cultivation of endangered and overharvested plants, *Conservation Biology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/cobi.13216](https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.13216)

Provided by Florida International University

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