The trade in traditional medicines forms part of a multimillion-rand ‘hidden economy’ in southern Africa. **Tony Dold** and **Michelle Cocks** examine this complex resource management issue facing conservation agencies, health care professionals, and resource users in South Africa.

**Traditional medicine**
Troubles come in many forms – physical, mental, spiritual, and cultural – and traditional medicines are used to treat them all. The supply of ingredients needs to be secured, however. If South Africa’s medicinal plants are to carry on offering protection from sorcery and evil spirits and ensuring good health and fortune, they need to be protected.

**Customers**
About 80% (27 million) of the African population in South Africa make use of traditional medicines. With a medical doctor to total population ratio in South Africa of 1:17 400 reported in 1993, there is no doubt that traditional medicine plays an important role in the health care system in the country.

Rural, low-income groups of people are not the only ones to use traditional medicine – a variety of people see it as essential for treating certain conditions, irrespective of their education and income levels.

**Traders**
The key medicinal plant traders are informal gatherer-hawkers, traditional healers (over 100 000 practising in the country), and owners of *muthi* and *amayeza esiXhosa* stores. Using and trading plants for medicine is no longer confined to traditional healers, but has entered both the informal and formal entrepreneurial sectors of South Africa’s economy, so the number of herbal gatherers and traders has increased.

The traders are mainly black middle-aged (62%) women (75%), with low levels of education (50% below grade 8), earning less than R500 per month (62%). The medicinal plant industry, therefore, plays a critical role in empowering a large number of women. Lack of access to such opportunities would leave them and their families destitute.

Most often, traders harvest plant material themselves, with the help of family members or friends, and they are the first and largest link in the market chain. The marketing of medicinal plants is largely informal.

**Plants traded**
Most of the 166 plant species harvested for trade in the Eastern Cape province come from three biomes, i.e. grassland (34%), valley thicket (23%), forest (18%), and 13% from both forest and thicket. Some species (12%) are also harvested from the fynbos biome in the west of the province, wetlands, and disturbed areas. Forest is significantly more threatened than grassland and thicket because the largest mass (7.2 kg/km²) of medicinal plants is harvested from there.

**Market value**
The medicinal trade in indigenous plants is worth about R270 million each year in South Africa. Almost 525 tonnes of plant material, valued at about R27 million per annum, is traded in six urban centres in the Eastern Cape alone. Most of the material is sold in its natural, unprocessed form, in small quantities ranging in price from R1 to R20, the average being R5 for a single item.

**Conservation status**
Intensive harvesting of more than 700 wild plant species for medicinal purposes poses a serious threat to biodiversity. The shift to a cash economy and the emergence of commercial harvesters – into what was previously a specialist activity restricted to traditional healers – mean that medicinal plants have become a common property resource, and there are few incentives for resource management or traditional conservation practices.

Traditional harvesting areas are coming under pressure, and there is a growing shortage of popular medicinal plants, which leads to price increases. As a result, several plant...
Some medicinal plant species make them potential new crops means to earn a living. Indeed, the high prices obtained for Domesticating and cultivating indigenous medicinal plants Cultivation is the answer have access to the plants. Medicinal plants for health care and for their livelihoods species, and still ensure that those who rely on the trade of programmes to conserve biodiversity, protect threatened new methods of cultivation as well as management been largely unsuccessful, we need urgently to develop medicinal plant trade in South Africa. Medicines is both impractical and inappropriate; it is expected to grow further, mainly because of HIV/AIDS. So many traditional healers report that the number of their patients has increased over the past five years, and they are already growing in their gardens for domestic use. Many of these, such as bulbous and succulent plants, are easily transplanted. They are grown on a very small scale and little or no active effort is made to propagate them. Medicinal plants are grown separately from garden food crops and from areas of high traffic in the garden to reduce the chance of physical damage and metaphysical contamination. Containers are seldom used. Some species are not cultivated because it is considered taboo to do so and because seeds and seedlings are not easy to obtain. Communal or ‘community’ nurseries were not seen as appropriate for growing medicinal plants, nor was the application of chemical fertilizers. Home gardens could solve the problem of over-exploitation. They are ideally suited for the domestication of medicinal plants, both for subsistence and for generating income. At the same time, they help to reduce harvesting pressure on wild plant populations and to conserve biodiversity.

**What about the future?**

Many traditional conservation measures have been largely unsuccessful, we need urgently to develop new methods of cultivation as well as management programmes to conserve biodiversity, protect threatened species, and still ensure that those who rely on the trade of medicinal plants for health care and for their livelihoods have access to the plants.

**Cultivation is the answer**

Domesticating and cultivating indigenous medicinal plants can decrease pressure on wild populations and provide the means to earn a living. Indeed, the high prices obtained for some medicinal plant species make them potential new crops for small-scale farmers and village home gardens. Although some traditional healing practices require plants to be harvested from the wild, most urban-based healers, patients, and customers in the Eastern Cape report that they would readily use cultivated plants for medicinal purposes if these became available.

A recent survey of 194 homes in three villages in the King William’s Town district assessed the potential for domesticking medicinal plant species in home gardens. Several trends emerged:

- More than half of the homes in the study site have more than one medicinal plant (including more than 50 different species) already growing in their gardens for domestic use. Many of these, such as bulbous and succulent plants, are easily transplanted. They are grown on a very small scale and little or no active effort is made to propagate them.
- Medicinal plants are grown separately from garden food crops and from areas of high traffic in the garden to reduce the chance of physical damage and metaphysical contamination. Containers are seldom used.
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**The top ten most frequently sold plants in the Eastern Cape**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plant name</th>
<th>Xhosa name</th>
<th>Common name</th>
<th>Medicinal use</th>
<th>Average price per kg (R)</th>
<th>Annual turnover (kg) (Market value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypoxis hemerocallidea</td>
<td>Ilabatsha</td>
<td>African potato</td>
<td>Tuber used to treat kidney/bladder disorders</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11 000 (R322 500)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilex mitis</td>
<td>Isidumo</td>
<td>Cape holly</td>
<td>The bark is used as an emetic</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>5 300 (R210 500)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhocissus digitata</td>
<td>Uchithibhunga</td>
<td>Wild grape</td>
<td>Tuber used as a body wash to treat cultural afflictions*, headaches, and high blood pressure</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6 500 (R75 200)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubia petiolaris</td>
<td>Impendulo</td>
<td>Vaskloubossie</td>
<td>The leaves are used as an emetic to treat skin disorders</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>2 100 (R89 500)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helichrysum odoratissimum</td>
<td>Impepho</td>
<td>Everlasting</td>
<td>The leaves are used in healing rituals</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2 200 (R149 500)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curtisia dentata</td>
<td>Umsholi</td>
<td>Assegai</td>
<td>The bark is used to treat cultural afflictions</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2 300 (R170 600)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protorhus longifolia</td>
<td>Ibintsha</td>
<td>Red beech</td>
<td>The bark is used to treat cultural afflictions</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2 700 (R72 600)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulbine latifolia</td>
<td>Uyakayakana</td>
<td>Wildekopieva</td>
<td>The bulb used to treat bladder infection, and as a veterinary medicine</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3 200 (R98 600)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gasteria bicolor</td>
<td>iNtelezi</td>
<td>Gasteria</td>
<td>Plant used as a body wash to treat cultural afflictions</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3 400 (R226 800)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapaneea melanophloeos</td>
<td>Umaphilwa</td>
<td>Cape beech</td>
<td>The bark is used as an emetic to treat cultural afflictions</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2 000 (R92 000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*affliction* | physical or mental distress, especially pain or illness

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