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**FILE: ■ Traditional Chinese Medicine
■ Conservation of Medicinal Plants
■ Biodiversity**

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RE: Increased Use of Chinese Medicinal Plants Threatens Biodiversity in China

Hepeng J. Traditional medicine 'threatens China's biodiversity.' *Science and Development Network*. December 20, 2004.

The rise in global popularity of traditional herbal medicine and the interest by the pharmaceutical industry in researching plants for their drug potentials has placed increasing demands on the natural resources of many countries. This article discusses the pressure being placed on China's ecosystems by people harvesting native wild medicinal plants to meet the market's demand for them.

According to Chen Shilin, deputy director of the Institute to Medicinal Plant Development, "between 60 and 70 percent of China's 3,000 threatened plant species are used in traditional medicine." Of those, 169 are protected species. The traditional medicine sector of China's economy was valued at U.S. \$11.5 billion in 2003, with U.S. \$712 million of herbal remedies exported. From 1993 to 2003, "demand for such medicines has grown 300 percent."

This increase in demand has resulted in environmental degradation, however. The Chinese government is now attempting to take measures to protect fragile ecosystems and make traditional herbal medicine more sustainable. Recently, China "has successfully cultivated or farmed 400 species used to make up traditional medicines. Half of these species account for more than 60 percent of all natural ingredients used in traditional medicine."

The issue of protecting biodiversity and medicinal plants is a global concern. The United Nations' World Health Organization (WHO) is actively pursuing multilateral agreements to protect the biodiversity and preserve traditional medicines; however, "consensus on the best way of protecting traditional knowledge including traditional medicine" has not yet been reached.¹ The balance between the lure of short-term profits and the need for long term sustainability has still not been attained in China and other parts of the world. Time will tell

if the will of governments to regulate their natural resources is strong enough to protect them from long-term degradation.

—*John Neustadt, ND*

Reference

¹Ninth meeting of health secretaries of countries of SEAR: globalization, trade, intellectual property rights (IPR) and health. *United Nations World Health Organization*. July 19, 2004. Available at: http://w3.whosea.org/EN/Section1430/Section1439/Section1590/Section1591/Section1594/Section1600_6491.htm#_ftnref2. Accessed May 23, 2005.

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