

Enforcing Nepal's law to protect orchids and to explore prospects for sustainable harvest



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Consultation Workshop

Enforcing Nepal's law to protect orchids and to explore prospects for sustainable harvest

Date: Saturday, 24 December 2022

Venue: Hotel Himalaya, Rato Baithak Hall, Lalitpur, Nepal



Background

Orchids are one of the largest groups of flowering plants on Earth, with more than 30,000 species. They represent >70% of CITES-listed species and are also among the most traded wildlife in the world. Although primarily thought of as ornamental plants orchids are also traded for their use in traditional Ayurvedic, Chinese, and Unani Medicines. However, there is little understanding of this trade (e.g., its scale, species targeted, and economic importance), and its implication for the long-term conservation of Nepal's >500 orchid species.

All orchid species are listed on the CITES convention and are often protected - on paper - under national legislation, but this has failed to stop the large-scale commercial harvest in Nepal. Our work started with anecdotes of this large-scale harvest. Over the past two years, we have conducted interviews with orchid harvesters and traders and trialed the first harvest monitoring of wild orchids in cooperation with rural communities across central Nepal. The massive trade we uncovered raises urgent concerns about the conservation enforcement of protected species and the need for widespread discussion.

A half-day consultation on “Enforcing Nepal’s law to protect orchids and to explore prospects for sustainable harvest” was organized in Kathmandu in late 2022. It aimed to 1) facilitate discussions on orchid conservation and trade with specific outcomes on enhanced visibility; 2) increase enforcement leading to more seizures in the future, and 3) explore the way forward for facilitating a pilot project on harvest and starting a species action plan.



Welcome Remarks & Introduction



Mr. Prakash Paudel, Research Associate, Greenhood welcomed the event participants, explained the workshop's overall objective, and asked everyone for a quick introduction.

Following the introduction of participants, Dr. Jacob Phelps, Co-Chair of IUCN SCC OSG and Senior Lecturer at Lancaster University, UK who is also the advisor and principal lead of the project remotely welcomed all the event participants through a short video. Following the welcome from Dr. Phelps, all the participants introduced themselves and the project team provided brief insights on project results.

Mr. Kamal Maden (Biodiversity Analyst and Senior Taxonomist for the project) briefly introduced orchids, their diversity, and their sensitivity, highlighting the significance of orchids.

Mr. Kumar Paudel (Director of Greenhood Nepal and Researcher on this project) talked about conservation enforcement and orchids in Nepal. And, Ms. Reshu Bashyal (Program Manager and Nepal Project Lead) presented an overview of the orchid trade in Nepal and shared the key research results.

"Baseline information encourages us to come up with meaningful, practical, and effective conservation plans for the next few years on how we can protect the world's most charismatic plants...."

World cafe activity

The world cafe activity focused on following key questions:

- How can we make the new CITES legislation work for orchids?
- How do we increase enforcement for orchids?
- Should we create a pilot project to trial more sustainable harvest techniques? How?

The event participants were grouped into three groups where each would work on one question for 30 minutes followed by open discussion.



Photo - Glimpses from the world cafe activity





Highlights from the world cafe activity

It should start with the scientific identification of species, at least for those orchids that are at the highest risk of illegal poaching and trade. The scientific identification should include a separate column for those orchids that have specific requirements for different medicinal traditions- we could either seek alternatives or opt for a sustainable harvest.

Although sustainable and well-monitored harvest seems like an ideal solution, there are challenges to its implementation. Even the frontline officials lack the capacity to identify the trade parts of many orchids. A majority of orchid harvest sites are remote and inaccessible and come up with financial constraints. Most importantly, there is a bit contradictory view among enforcement officials regarding the CITES itself - the frontline officers are in urgent need of capacity development.

There are traders' associations working to help poor harvesters and traders to sustain their livelihoods. The government, in almost all talks, says to promote economic growth by facilitating the sustainable use of medicinal and aromatic plants but in practice, they do not support the process. Species management plans from the CITES should be prepared and the local harvesters and traders should be allowed to collaborate with local/central government to discuss the possibility of sustainable orchid harvest.

Above all, we could at least start with, the orchid inventory followed by proper monitoring, molecular characterization, research, and capacity development of key stakeholders

Closing remarks

Ramesh Basnet, Acting Director General, Department of Plant Resources, DPR:
The DPR is always supportive of research that is based on intensive fieldwork. The medicinal plants and fungi are harvested on large scale, and illegally exported but the irony is we lack resources for our local use. Also, protected species are being traded as other species and we are concerned about it.

Devesh Mani Tripathi, Director General, Department of Forests and Soil Conservation:
The consultation event has been an eye-opener because we never thought that there was such a large-scale harvest and trade of medicinal orchids. We need more research on how to make effective implementation of CITES and legislation. Also, we should come up with livelihood alternatives.

Hon. Nar Bahadur Bista, National Assembly, Federal Parliament of Nepal: Orchids have been used for a long. When things are traditionally linked, it is difficult to control. However, we can not let go of our valuable and endangered species, they are our assets. Awareness is required both at higher authority level and local level.





Summary and way forward

Summary and way forward

Orchids are one of the most exciting, charismatic, and unique plant groups, the tiger of the plant world. But unlike tigers, we know incredibly little about orchids. For most of the ~500 orchids in Nepal, and over 30,000 orchids around the world, we know little about conservation status but we know from anecdotes that their population is declining at alarming rates. The project collected baseline information to recommend better decisions in management, enforcement, and policy implications, the consultation “*Enforcing Nepal’s law to protect orchids and to explore prospects for sustainable harvest*” was one of our attempts. We are excited to see all the >65 participants - orchid researchers, conservationists, government officials including CITES scientific and management authorities, enforcement officials, plant traders, representatives from local government authorities of our project sites, and journalists in one platform, with a single goal to conserve these protected species.



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