

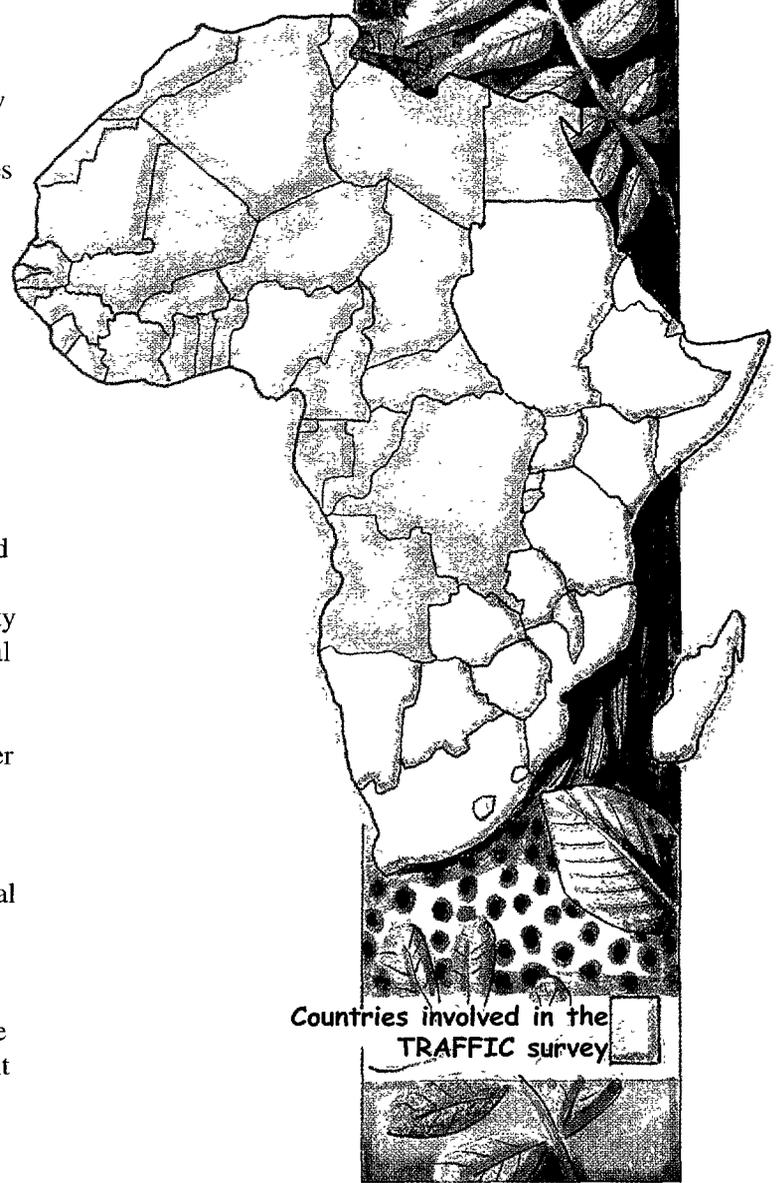
**Time to Act on  
Traditional  
Medicine and  
Wild Resources**

**A Challenge to the Health and Wildlife Heritage of Africans**

**Medicine from the wild.** Africa boasts a long and valued tradition of using wild animals and plants for medicinal purposes. Thousands of species have been documented in indigenous health systems by ethnobotanical, anthropological and zoological researchers. Few researchers, however, have examined the availability of these wild resources, the quantities in which they are used, and the threats to the species and habitats in which they occur. Reports of scarcity of species used for medicine are being received with increasing frequency as we welcome the new millennium.

**Nature on the run.** As part of an increasingly global trend, forests are being cut, agriculture is rapidly expanding into natural areas, and marginal lands are increasingly being converted for a variety of human uses. This alarming trend applies in Africa as the needs of a rising population and increasingly industrialized society are taking their toll on Africa's remaining natural areas. Habitat degradation certainly has devastating effects on wildlife but the consequences of this change extend much further to threaten the very health of millions of people in the East and southern African region.

In response to this vital health and environmental concern TRAFFIC East/Southern Africa carried out a survey of plants and animals used for medicine in East and southern Africa and Madagascar. The survey aimed to identify those species in need of conservation and management attention, and to develop strategies to address conservation needs for selected species and issues.



Countries involved in the TRAFFIC survey



**A tradition going strong.** The TRAFFIC study confirmed that the use of traditional medicine in East and southern Africa is widespread. As a medical system, it is affordable, accessible, and culturally acceptable. In the past, colonial regimes legislated against use of traditional medicine and prohibited or restricted the activities of traditional medical practitioners, largely in an effort to extirpate traditional belief systems in favor of Christianity. Efforts to repeal outdated legislation are gaining momentum, while traditional practices gain recognition for their cultural and medicinal values.

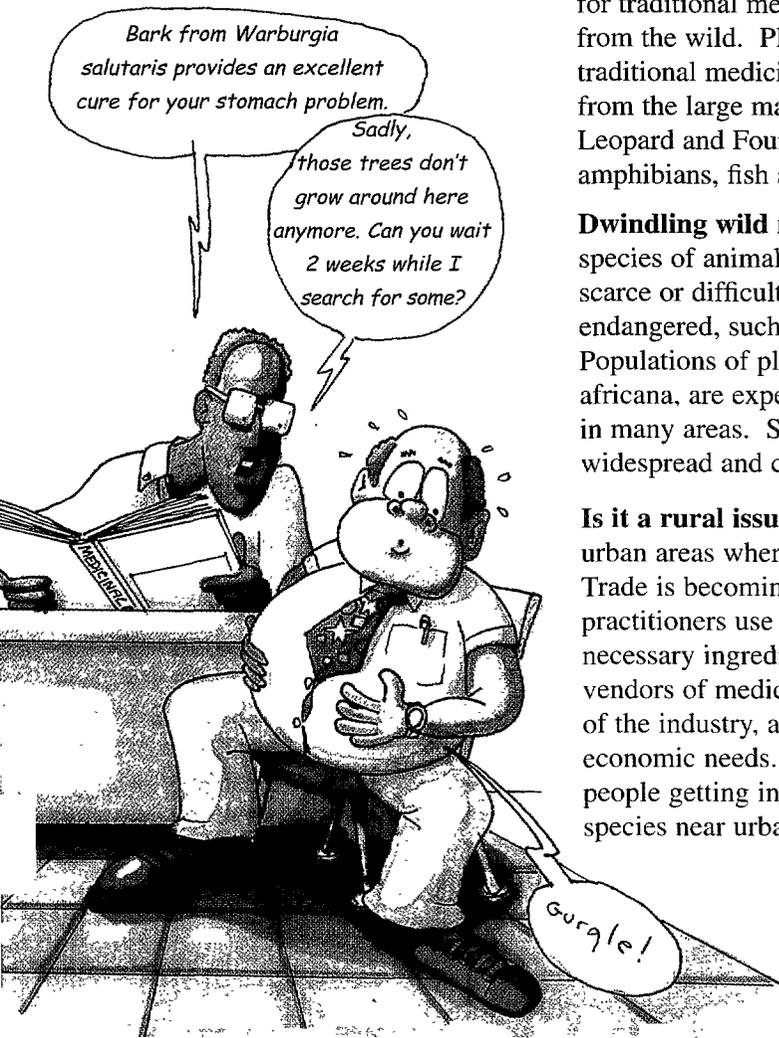
The popularity of traditional medicine is increasing due to several key factors. The cost of conventional medicine is beyond the reach of many Africans, and is often unavailable. The ratio of Western doctors to patients in many parts of the region is extremely poor. Traditional medicine, on the other hand, is available in almost every village, with either traditional medical practitioners present, or knowledgeable elders able to treat health problems.

Several governments in the region have realized the value of traditional medicine especially in relation to primary health care in their countries. Zambia and Zimbabwe in particular are noteworthy for their efforts to increase understanding between traditional and conventional practitioners, and to encourage cooperation in the treatment of a variety of ailments.

**What species are involved?** A tremendous variety of plants and animals are used in the preparation of traditional medicines, and numerous species are under pressure from over-exploitation. Few projects have been undertaken to propagate or breed species in demand for traditional medicine and most plant and animal species are taken from the wild. Plants are particularly vital components to African traditional medicine, but a wide range of animals are also used ranging from the large mammals such as African Elephant and Giraffe to the Leopard and Four-toed Hedgehog. A variety of birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish and invertebrates are also utilized.

**Dwindling wild resources.** Over 100 key species of plants, and 29 species of animals, have been found by TRAFFIC to have become scarce or difficult to obtain. Some of these species are known to be endangered, such as the African Wild Ass and the Green Turtle. Populations of plant species such as *Warburgia salutaris* and *Prunus africana*, are experiencing serious decline and are now regarded as rare in many areas. Scarcity is also reported for some species thought to widespread and common, such as the Baobab.

**Is it a rural issue?** Marketing for traditional medicines is prevalent in urban areas where people no longer have direct access to key species. Trade is becoming increasingly commercialized as traditional medical practitioners use networks of professional collectors to supply the necessary ingredients. Unfortunately, many of these collectors and vendors of medicinals have little interest in the long term sustainability of the industry, and are only involved to make a profit to meet daily economic needs. In Kenya, rural to urban migration has led to more people getting into the business, with an increasing scarcity of valued species near urban areas as more people search for diminishing supplies.



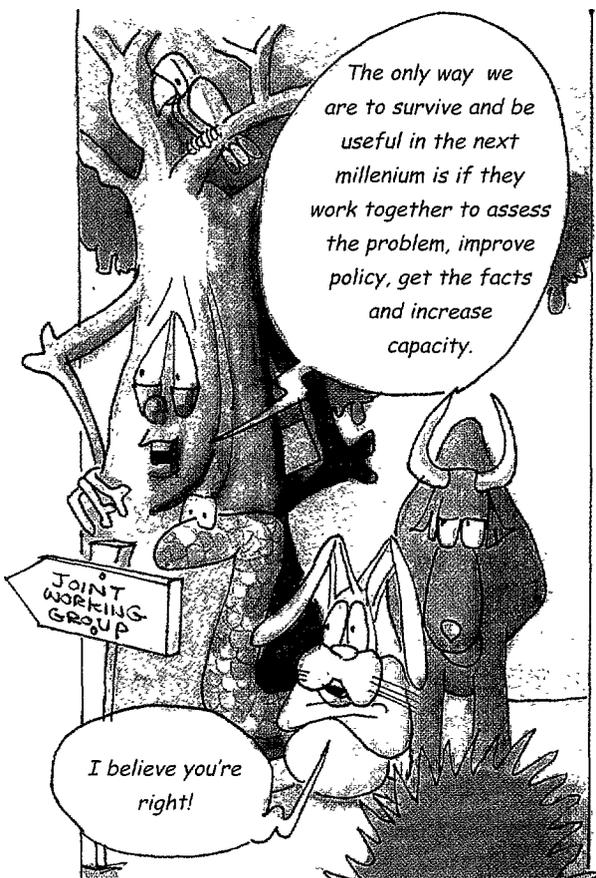
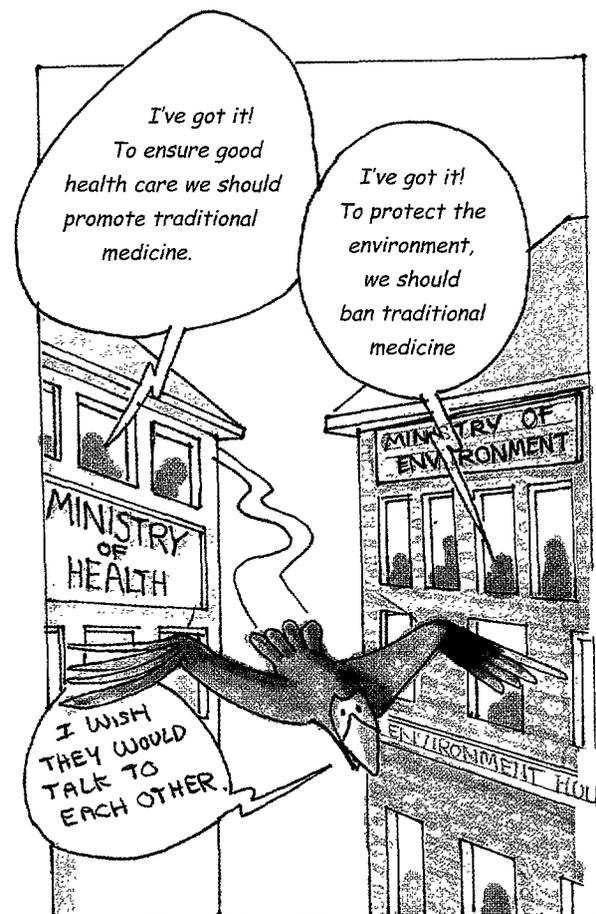
**What can be done?** Many organisations within government, NGOs and the private sector have made progress in addressing the issues. However, joint action must be taken on several levels to solve this looming health and conservation crisis. Both the natural resources sector and the health sector must be involved in developing strategies to address the issue and ensure that African countries retain their wild heritage and a high standard of healthcare for all. Action is needed on the conservation, management, and awareness fronts, as well as the fields of regulation and research. Efforts, however, will only be successful if they are cross-sectoral, and encourage cooperation and collaboration between government health ministries, natural resource managers, traditional medical practitioners and a wide variety of other interest groups.

**Reduction in use is not the answer.** Demand for traditional medicine is increasing, hence strategies to increase supply are especially important, and will involve government and private action to propagate, breed, and sustainably harvest plant and animal species from the wild.

**Strategy for Health and Nature.** TRAFFIC's efforts to prompt such action involve bringing together representatives from sectors and industries that do not traditionally collaborate, as innovation and creativity are essential in developing strategies and definitive actions to address conservation and health issues. A first effort aimed at bringing together experts from a variety of sectors involved a workshop held in December 1998 in Nairobi with participants with a diversity of expertise, ranging from commercial game management, economics, traditional medical practice, commercial herbal medicine production, biodiversity and conservation. These experts reviewed the results of TRAFFIC's survey, deliberated on the problem of declining wildlife medicinals and strategized how to address the issue.

Following thorough examination of the conservation, management, awareness, research and regulation aspects of the issue, the workshop participants recommended four main focus areas for joint action.

- ① **Assessment.** Promoting and undertaking research which addresses data management and policy deficiencies.
- ② **Policy improvement.** In the area of policy and regulation, it was ascertained that there are no specific policies or laws covering wildlife medicinals, and there are numerous regulations that impede conservation and appropriate management of these resources. These regulatory mechanisms need to be reviewed and if changes are needed then action should be taken.
- ③ **Fact-finding.** Inventories of wildlife medicinals should be undertaken to increase knowledge about the status of medicinal plant and animal species, so that appropriate action can be taken to ensure sustainable utilization.
- ④ **Capacity building.** Finally, capacity building should be promoted among local institutions, particularly those involving traditional medical practitioners. This was recognized as being essential, as these individuals have much knowledge and commitment to conservation and sustainable use, but often lack the necessary tools to achieve positive action.



**The time to act is now.** Natural resources are declining and healthcare needs are rising. To meet the multi-sectoral goals of conservation and sustainable utilization of wild plant and animals, AND medicinal security for all, joint efforts are required. No one group can do it alone. Agencies and organizations have different priorities and objectives, but these are inter-linked. Only through collaboration and cooperation can conflicting aims can be addressed and our problems solved. We need research and good information

**Who should lead the effort?** Wildlife and health agencies have the most direct contact with these issues, and are well placed to start the dialog. Varying interest groups can provide valuable and innovative contributions - we must be creative to devise new means to ensure that health and conservation goals are met. Those who could be involved include: government officials from the health and natural resources sectors, local community groups, traditional medical practitioners, private sector game managers, forest resource managers, legal experts, marketing and trade experts, economists and biologists.

**Progress can start with dialog.** A working group should be formed with the aim of developing a joint strategy to find means to:

- 1) improve our knowledge of the situation
- 2) improve or change policy as necessary
- 3) increase capacity to address conservation and health needs.



***The new millennium depends on it.***

For more information about this issue or to receive copies of TRAFFIC's medicinals workshop report, contact TRAFFIC East/Southern Africa. TRAFFIC East/Southern Africa is part of the worldwide TRAFFIC Network, the world's largest wildlife trade monitoring programme. TRAFFIC is a joint programme of WWF-World Wide Fund for Nature and IUCN-The World Conservation Union, and has offices in most parts of the world. TRAFFIC's purpose is to help ensure that wildlife trade is at sustainable levels and is carried out in accordance with domestic and international laws.

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