

B R I E F I N G

D O C U M E N T

1. Introduction

1.1 Concern: The Forgotten Culture

Ethnobotany is the study of plants indigenous to a particular area and how the people of that culture use them. The medical use of these plants is the most obvious, but ethnobotany includes the use of indigenous plants for food, shelter, clothing, religious ceremonies etc.

In terms of their medicinal properties, South Africa has an abundance of useful plants throughout the country with over 3000 known wild species and approximately 80% of the black population making use of these traditional medicine systems. More people are involved in the traditional medicine sector than in the western health system (Van Wyk, 1997, p 7).

However, many of these medicinal plant species are being threatened by extinction as a result of over harvesting (www.botany.unp.ac.za/rcpgd/rcpgd.htm). The first reason for over-harvesting is that the habitats of these species are diminishing at a rapid rate due to the encroachment from agricultural, industrial and housing developments. This reduction in the plants' habitat and the increase in the use of medicinal plants places great pressure on these species.

The second reason for over-harvesting is that many of the traditions and taboos associated with medicinal plants have been forgotten with the emergence of modern, urbanised healers. Traditionally, the 'inyanga', who is the herbalist and the 'sangoma', who is the diviner, would be guided by an ancestral spirit through dreams and prayer as to which plants should be gathered and in what season so that the plant can reach maximum potency (Van Wyk, 1997, p 14).

With the loss of these customs, lesser-experienced healers often remove the entire plant when only parts of it are needed, giving the species little chance of future survival. These healers tend to buy many of their products from street 'muti' markets, although this does create job opportunities for gatherers, they unfortunately use the same destructive harvesting methods (www.nbi.ac.za/research/ethnobot.htm).

Many of the ethnobotanic properties of these indigenous plants are known only to the tribes, or even specifically to the 'inyanga' within the tribe, and are passed on through word of mouth. The extinction of these species will not only result in the loss of unrecorded medicines, but also in the loss of a cultural heritage.

With the reduction in plant numbers, the unsustainable practice of importing these plants has emerged. This however will only put further pressure on the species in these other regions (ibid).

To alleviate this problem of over harvesting, many of the endangered species are being grown on farms; this may reduce the pressure on the wild populations. The negative result remains in that natural vegetation being lost to agricultural development with the alteration in the habitats of other plant and animal species. An awareness of the importance of these plants needs to be created for their protection.

Medicinal plants have always played an important role in African culture, however, unlike in Europe, South America, etc where this culture has been embraced and explored

over time, in the past South Africa's traditional culture was ignored and traditional healers became known as 'witch-doctors' resulting in the practice of traditional medicines receiving a negative stigma.

As traditional healthcare gets pulled rapidly further into modern society, a number of problems follow. As mentioned earlier, informal trade has resulted in many inexperienced 'healers' prescribing incorrect combinations and quantities of 'mutis' resulting in illness and even death. Many plants appear very similar leading to difficulties with identification resulting in inexperienced healers often prescribing medicines inappropriately that don't provide any relief from illness. This contributes to the idea that traditional medicine is a sham (Meyer, 2003). Another notable problem is commercial outfits producing 'herbal' medicines that are sold practically anywhere and can be bought without any medical prescription. Certain combinations of herbal and chemical medicines can be fatal (Rothermeyer, 2002).

1.2 Client

The government has realised the importance of this resource in terms of its medical value as well as its cultural

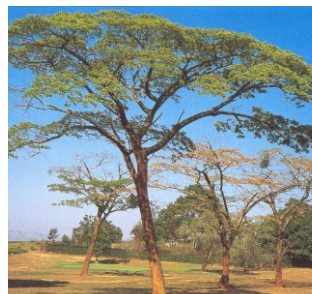
significance, the Department of Arts Culture Science & Technology (DACST), which recently split into the Department of Arts & Culture (DAC) and the Department of Science & Technology (DST), awarded an R11 million grant to the Medical Research Council (MRC) and The Department of Botany at Pretoria University (Meyer, 2003) for further research into medicinal plant systems. Currently their research is split between the two institutions. The Medical Research Council Traditional Medicines Research Unit was founded in 1997 and their principal objectives are:

- To establish a research culture, and to introduce modern research methodologies around the use and understanding of traditional medicines
- To create an environment that will attract young scientists and potential leaders in the field (<http://www.mrc.ac.za>).

The MRC is more concerned with the ethnopharmacology of the chemical extracts in the plants. The Department of Botany do all of the field-work (plant gathering, interviewing traditional healers etc.) and screening and documentation of medicinal plants. By creating a unified facility the research efficiency will greatly improve. These two institutions



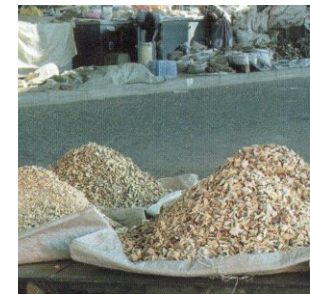
1.1 *Asclepias fruticosa*



1.2 *Albizia adianthifolia*



1.3 A forgotten culture



1.4 Urban 'Muthi' markets