

# Unprecedented meeting gives TCM specialists a voice and could lead to co-operation

by Judy Mills, Director, TRAFFIC East Asia

TRAFFIC East Asia hosted a ground-breaking forum recently between those wishing to use endangered species as traditional Chinese medicines and those who wish to conserve those species in the wild.

The International Symposium on Traditional Chinese Medicine and Wildlife Conservation, co-hosted by the Hong Kong Agriculture and Fisheries Department and funded by the Rufford Foundation in the UK, brought together delegates and observers from around the world in Hong Kong.

The main aim of the symposium was to enlist traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) specialists in efforts to dissuade the unsustainable

Department of Health.

The pre-symposium fora enabled TCM specialists to acquaint themselves with the many facets of the international controversy over the use of endangered species' parts as medicine. In addition, the seminars encouraged airing of the TCM communities' grievances about wildlife conservation, in hope of moving forward to even more constructive exchanges at the symposium.

Topics of discussion included the pros and cons of farming medicinal wildlife, the value of *in situ* wildlife conservation, use of substitutes and the concept of sustainable use.

The 22 delegates for the symposium itself came from TCM communities in China, Japan, Hong

Kong, allowing TCM specialists, for the first time ever, to be at the centre of an international forum on how wildlife conservation affects TCM and how TCM affects wildlife conservation. Interpretation was provided simultaneously in English, Cantonese and Mandarin.

Delegates repeatedly stated that the West does not understand TCM. They based this assertion, in part, on the West's call for a ban on all trade in rhino horn, used in TCM as a cure for life-threatening fever. They cited the "insulting" propensity of Westerners to claim that the primary use of rhino horn is as an aphrodisiac.

A delegate from China's State Administration for Traditional Chinese Medicine stated that "TCM is not superstition", which she felt is the West's perception of TCM. TCM is based on empirical evidence gathered over thousands of years, she said, although "empirical" in a sense different from the understanding of the term in the West. Most of China's 1.2 billion people also believe in and use TCM.

While there seemed to be a consensus that conservation of wild medicinal species would be in the best interests of TCM, delegates were also adamant that Western ideals should not legislate the East's morality or its health-care choices.

Delegates noted an increasing demand for TCM in the face of diminishing supplies of raw materials. Some blamed the increasing instances of scarcity on what they felt were over-protective measures imposed by wildlife conservationists, rather than a depletion of wild populations. Some understood that wild medicinal species are still plentiful in China, despite China's huge and long-standing consumption of TCM. Others noted how choices of wildlife medicinal derivatives had decreased significantly, but they blamed "environ-

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***"The Hong Kong Government hopes that this unprecedented forum marks the beginning of a joint venture that will ensure the survival of endangered wildlife and the practice of traditional Chinese medicine."***

— Gordon Siu, Hong Kong Secretary of Economic Services

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use of endangered species as medicine. TRAFFIC East Asia's research had shown that TCM specialists felt victimized by bans on the use of rhino horn and tiger bone, two of TCM's most revered ingredients. The resulting resentments alienated this important wildlife-user group from co-operating in the responsible use of wildlife derivatives. Such co-operation is said to be essential to prevent endangering other plants and animals of medicinal value.

To make the October symposium as useful as possible, TRAFFIC East Asia held pre-symposium seminars in Beijing and Hong Kong, and conducted a series of presentations for Taiwan's TCM specialists with the support of the

Kong and Singapore.

The 50 observers included TCM specialists from China, Hong Kong and South Korea, authorities from China and Hong Kong; staff from various TRAFFIC offices, the CITES Secretariat and the CITES Animals Committee; and conservationists representing IUCN, WWF, the Asian Bureau of Conservation and the Conservancy Association. Others included representatives from the University of Hong Kong Department of Zoology and Hong Kong's Chinese Medicinal Materials Research Centre as well as advertising and communications specialists.

The composition of delegates and observers maximized Asian partici-

mental changes" rather than overconsumption in TCM.

Delegates from China said that not all medicinal species remain plentiful in China but many do, in part, because 40 per cent of China's annual needs for medicinal wildlife are met from farmed or propagated specimens. They said farming and propagation had not only stabilized supplies but also stabilized prices.

Some delegates insisted that wildlife's only value is as a resource for use by humans: banning wildlife from human use renders it useless to humanity and takes away its value. The way to increase the value of wildlife, they argued, is to offer economic incentives for farming and propagation of it.

The delegates repeatedly said that "bans do not work". They do not work, they said, because blanket bans cause hoarding by profiteers, wealthy people are still able to buy the banned products on the black market and bans deny the use of "irreplaceable" medicines that are used in TCM.

They favoured strict government regulatory schemes for endangered wildlife medicinals rather than bans. Some suggested that government price controls on the limited legal supplies of parts from endangered species would eliminate profiteering. Other delegates at the

symposium suggested limiting frivolous use of any endangered species' derivatives to allow for use in emergency situations.

They were willing to give "breathing space" to wild species in order for them to have time to recover in the wild, but this "breathing space" would have to come in the form of regulation rather than prohibition if it were to enjoy full co-operation.

Delegates also suggested that their consumption of endangered species' derivatives is exaggerated by wildlife conservationists. They claimed that if their annual needs for endangered species were accurately documented, the world would see their contribution to depletion of wild species as minimal, perhaps making way for trade under a quota system.

Several speakers emphasized that they are health-care providers and not criminals but bans on life-saving wildlife medicinals "forced" them into breaking the law.

However, it was clear that some of these people were ignorant of how to trade legally in species listed on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) or unwilling to use the legal means that are available to do so. International commercial trade in Appendix II species is al-

lowed with a permit.

A Hong Kong observer who researches TCMs suggested creation of an international forum that could clinically test TCM ingredients so that more effort could be placed on supplying efficacious materials, while ineffective wildlife medicines could be dropped from the TCM pharmacopoeia. He pointed out that ingredients have been added and discarded from the pharmacopoeia since the inception of TCM 5,000 years ago.

There seemed to be consensus among all representatives of the TCM industry that TCM should be brought into the arena of wildlife conservation, particularly in regard to the CITES process. They asked to be better informed of wildlife conservation issues that may affect TCM and said that they, in turn, would be willing to help better document TCM's part in the depletion of wild species.

As a means of maintaining and nurturing the dialogue established at the ground-breaking symposium, TRAFFIC East Asia will publish a multilingual newsletter about wildlife conservation issues for TCM communities throughout East Asia.

The proceedings of the symposium are expected to be published by TRAFFIC East Asia in the first half of 1996. ■

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