

MEDICINAL PLANTS Trade

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This series of briefing notes provides summary information on the various parts of the forestry sector. The studies, commissioned by DWAF, focus on the role that each sub-sector can play in promoting poverty eradication. DWAF recognises the importance forests and forestry play in people's livelihoods and aims to create an environment that will increase forestry's impact on local-level development.

Introduction

- Forest plants are an important source of herbal medicine in South Africa. A large and growing industry exists in harvesting such plants and in the processing and selling of herbal and natural medicinal products made from them.
- There are an estimated 28 million users of indigenous medicinal plant products in South Africa and 255 000 traditional healers in southern Africa.
- An estimated 20 000 tonnes of medicinal plants are traded annually in South Africa with a street value of approximately R270 million.
- The demand for medicinal plants is increasing, with a growing consumer population and no easily available suitable alternatives or substitutes.
- Rapidly dwindling wild stocks of medicinal plants, and the extinction of some species in the wild, are prompting changes in the medicinal plant market creating opportunities for commercial cultivation.
- The current market players are mainly black rural women who harvest medicinal plants in rural areas and retail them at urban street markets. Unless ways are found to secure

Licensed bark harvesting in Umzimkulu State Forest



legal access to medicinal plant resources and promote cultivation, such rural women are at risk of losing their livelihoods.

Supply of Medicinal Plant Resources

Wild harvests

- Harvesters collect plants from the wild and supply these raw products in bulk, with little or no processing, to the urban informal street markets.
- Approximately 16 000 harvesters, predominantly rural black women, operate in KwaZulu-Natal alone.
- Harvesters are largely unable to obtain permits for harvesting and therefore operate illegally, constantly running the risk of arrest, fines or even jail. However the need to earn income motivates them to continue with the harvesting.
- The supply of plants in the traditional medicine sub-sector is declining as naturally occurring (wild) stocks are systematically depleted.
- The extinction of certain popular species in the wild (outside of protected areas) such as the pepper bark tree (*Warburgia salutaris*) and wild ginger (*Siphonochilus aethiopicus*), have already been reported.
- Harvesters are now targeting resources in formally protected areas (such as State forests) to access scarce, high-value plants.

Commercial cultivation

- The increase in demand and the decline in wild stocks has created the opportunity for commercial cultivation of indigenous medicinal plants.
- Only a few species are being produced commercially, with production focused on high value plants currently being traded in informal markets.
- Commercial producers engage in the bulk trade of raw products, directly with processing and manufacturing enterprises, where the raw materials are processed into tablets, tonics, or creams.



- However, cultivation operations are expensive to establish and require secure contracts for the purchase of the plant material in order to guarantee a return on the investment in cultivation. Without the existence of an enabling environment to reduce these risks, cultivation potentially excludes a large majority of the existing harvesters and traders, particularly those from remote and poor rural areas.
- It is therefore important to supplement the commercial cultivation initiatives with legal and sustainable harvesting opportunities from protected areas where extensive resources of medicinal plants still remain.

Business Opportunities in Medicinal Plants Trade

Regulating wild harvesting

- Many medicinal plant species are still found in the State forests. If these species are managed appropriately and sustainably harvested, they can provide valuable income generating opportunities for many existing harvesters and traders from poor rural areas.
- For this to happen, a system must be developed and implemented for harvesters to register and legally access medicinal plant resources from State forests and formally protected areas (e.g. national and provincial nature reserves, or even private protected areas).
- Registered and controlled access by harvesters would enable authorities to monitor and regulate the species, quantities and areas from which plants are harvested.
- A pilot sustainable harvesting project has already been successfully implemented in DWAF managed Umzimkulu Forests. In this case, the Sizamimpilo Harvesters Association has been registered and legal harvesting licences have been issued to the members of the Association by DWAF for the collection of indigenous medicinal

Rural woman trading harvested medicinal plants at urban street markets



plants, in collaboration with DWAF, from the Umzimkulu Forests.

- The members of the Sizamimpilo Harvesters Association are mainly women from the Umzimkulu District who have for many years been illegally entering and harvesting medicinal plants from the DWAF managed Umzimkulu Forests.
- Creating the enabling environment through legalisation and regulation of harvesting provides a win-win opportunity: the harvesters secure legal access to a supply of medicinal plants managed by the authorities, while the authorities are offered an opportunity to gain control over the harvesting of resources from their protected or private areas.
- However this model has yet to be widely applied in State forests and protected areas throughout South Africa.

An assortment of typically unprocessed medicinal plants traded at the street markets



Requirements for Creating an Enabling Environment

DWAF needs to enable access to harvesting of medicinal plants by local rural harvesters. This initiative would need to include the following components:

- Create awareness among relevant DWAF officials (national and regional) of the needs for legalising access and harvesting.
- Develop a system for the registration of harvesters' associations with DWAF.
- Develop a model system for issuing and managing licences allocated to registered harvesters' associations.
- Develop a generic system for recording the areas and quantities of harvesting, so that impacts can be identified and regulated. This system should closely conform with the DWAF initiative to develop principles, criteria, indicators and standards for sustainable forest management.
- Assist in the organization of harvesters at selected sites to support the rollout of the project.

