

Traditional healers discuss sustainable use of medicinal plants

Some 72% of South Africans still use medicinal plants on a regular basis, but this demand is placing pressure on remaining populations of such plant species, resulting in a significant decline in availability over the past three decades.

The South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) is therefore developing a Biodiversity Management Plan for Species (BMP-S) for threatened medicinal plant species in Mpumalanga's Ehlanzeni District Municipality, which comprises the four local municipalities of Bushbuckridge, Mbombela, Thaba Chweu and Nkomazi.

This project is part of the broader Biodiversity and Land Use Project funded by the Global Environment Facility. The project is engaging with traditional healers and *muthi* gatherers to cooperatively develop Biodiversity Management Plans for six threatened medicinal plant species, to ensure conservation and sustainable use.

Selecting the species entailed identifying those for which the selling price was rising as they were becoming harder to find in the wild and in markets, and then prioritising these based on conservation status, population trends, distribution patterns, demand, ease of propagation and presence in protected areas.

Two of the six medicinal plants chosen are the endangered pepper bark tree *Warburgia salutaris* (Isibhaha; Xibaha; Monaka) and the critically endangered wild ginger *Siphonochilus aethiopicus* (Isiphephetho; Xirungulu; Isidungulu). The others are the bulb *Bowiea volubilis* (Ugibisisila; Moemo), a medicinal plant from the carrot family *Alepidea cordifolia* (Ikhathazo; Lešoko), the succulent *Haworthiopsis limifolia* (Umathithibala; Kgopa), and the elephant foot caudex plant *Dioscorea sylvatica* (Inyathelo-lwe-ndlovu; Kgato).

Engagement between conservation practitioners, traditional healers and *muthi* gatherers is vital to determine the management interventions required to conserve the existing medicinal plant species and ensure availability of medicinal material for future use. The team working on the BMP-S travelled from village to village in the four local municipalities to reach as many healers as possible. A total of 137 healers and three *muthi* gatherers were interviewed, and key representatives from each village were then invited to a workshop held at the Lowveld Botanical Gardens in Mbombela in November. Attendees had the opportunity to engage directly with law enforcement officials and conservation practitioners working both within the district and in national government.

It emerged that 90% of the healers travel long distances to collect medicinal plants, the majority of healers buy



Traditional healers, conservation practitioners and law enforcement officials came together for a workshop at the Lowveld Botanical Gardens in Mbombela (formerly Nelspruit) in November.

medicinal material from markets and pension payouts, and healers from three of the four municipalities cultivate medicinal plants. The healers identified cultivating as the key conservation intervention needed to conserve species, and indicated they would be willing to grow plants in their home gardens should they be provided with seedlings. Participants also mentioned that protected areas should cultivate those species that will be difficult for communities to cultivate because of habitat differences, water and land availability.

In addition, the need to simplify the permit process was identified as a management priority. Healers spoke about the victimisation they experienced when harvesting material without permits, but the relevance of having permits and how it benefits the sustainable use of species was explained. The workshop was beneficial to healers as they made direct contact with officials from whom permits could be obtained in future.

As part of the development of the management plan, the team is conducting extensive surveys of all six species in the wild, and has already discovered many populations not previously known. Many of these are in protected areas and on private land, so they can act as long-term genetic resource banks. The team also found areas of communal land where there are still good populations of medicinal plants. The communities that have tenure over these areas require support to ensure that overharvesting by gatherers from other parts of South Africa does not take place.

Issued by SANBI. The management plan will be finalised in 2021 and will be made available for comment. If you would like to know more about this work or would like to contribute to the management actions, please contact: Domitilla Raimondo at d.raimondo@sanbi.org.za