



Publication: Mid South Coast Rising Sun - Main
Title: Arbor Month: Conserving Medicinal plants in South Africa
Publish date: 10 Sep 2024
Page: 3

Reach: 19850
AVE: R 27269.40
Author: Staff Reporter

Arbor Month: Conserving Medicinal plants in South Africa

AS WE celebrate Arbor Month, it is crucial to highlight the importance of conserving and protecting our trees, especially those used in traditional medicine. The traditional medicine trade in South Africa is a significant industry, valued at R2.9 billion annually and accounting for 5.6% of the National Health budget. This vibrant trade supports 27 million consumers and provides a livelihood for at least 133,000 people, many of whom are rural women. However, the sustainability of this trade is at risk due to the unsustainable harvesting of plant material from the wild, involving around 771 species.

The report "Economics of the Traditional Medicine Trade in South Africa" (Mander, M.; Ntuli, L.; Diederichs, N.; Mavundle, K.) underscores the urgent need to protect tree species used for medicinal purposes. Popular species are becoming locally extinct and are being traded at high prices, raising serious concerns about the future of the traditional medicine trade and its benefits.

"Arbor Month provides an ideal opportunity to showcase Sappi's efforts in preserving biodiversity and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources. By raising awareness about the importance of protecting medicinal plants and the environment, Sappi aims to promote a culture of conservation and sustainability. The Sappi Rare, Threatened, and Endangered Species (RTES) Programme plays a crucial role in this context," comments Giovanni Sale, Sustainability Manager, Sappi Southern Africa. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 80% of people in Africa use traditional medicine, and over 82% of urban and rural black South Africans rely on these practices. The RTES Programme focuses on species identified by scientific methods and organisations like the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), ensuring these species, especially those used in traditional medicine, are protected from unsustainable harvesting. Additionally, illegal and overharvesting of



Traditional Healers workshop.

these medicinal plants occurs on Sappi-owned land, including areas meant for biodiversity conservation. Protecting these species is vital for maintaining biodiversity and ensuring that medicinal plants can be used sustainably for future generations. The Sappi RTES Programme, initiated in 2013, initially focused on the Warburgia salutaris (Pepperbark) project near the western borders of Kruger National Park (KNP). At that time, the situation was so dire that a grove of these trees in KNP had to be guarded by armed personnel to protect them from muti poachers. Despite strict laws and the risk of being caught or even killed, poachers relentlessly targeted the trees.

Since 2015, KNP and its partners have distributed 85,000 Warburgia salutaris trees, starting with just 40 in the first year. Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife and its partners have also distributed 25,000 trees since 2019, achieving an 85% survival rate for the trees planted and monitored by distribution agencies.

The programme adopts a team approach, working with recognised experts, including social ecologists mandated by government legislation, who work directly with traditional healers and their communities. This collaboration makes the extension of the project a natural fit.

"The Sappi Shaw Forestry Research Centre has been proud to play an instrumental role in developing new methods to secure better germination and propagation of the Pepperbark tree, and due to the success of the programme, we have now extended that support and other species have been identified for phase two of the project," said Giovanni. "Sappi's involvement not only benefits the programme by contributing to the conservation of valuable medicinal plants but also aligns with its broader goals of environmental sustainability and community development," he said.

The programme is being extended to include Prunus africana (African Cherry), Ocotea bullata (Black Stinkwood), Vachellia xanthophloea

(Fever Tree), and Curtisia dentata (Assegai Tree), with the Sappi Shaw Research team conducting trials for Prunus africana and Ocotea bullata and the Assegai Tree.

Other partnerships and collaboration within the programme include academic institutions, the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) nursery, the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) in Nelspruit, and national and regional parks like Kruger National Park and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.

Arbor Month serves as a timely reminder of the importance of these efforts, encouraging continued dedication to conserving our natural heritage and promoting sustainable practices for future generations.

*Issued on behalf of Sappi
 Zeldi Schwalbach
 Consultant External Communications
 Sappi Southern Africa*