

Executive Summary - Orchids: Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan

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For centuries orchids have gripped the imagination, inspiring mass-collection in the latter half of the nineteenth century and extending to certain genera such as *Paphiopedilum* in recent times. Although CITES legislation offers protection to the most endangered species by placing them on Appendix I, the remaining 20,000 or so orchid species are included in Appendix II either because they might become threatened by trade so monitoring is needed, or because they look like other orchid species listed in the Appendices. However, the greatest threat to orchid diversity is habitat loss; for orchids this may occur on a very small scale because a single tropical tree may bear hundreds of epiphytic orchid species. The scale of threat to orchid diversity then reaches frightening proportions as millions of hectares of habitat are lost annually to ranching, monocrop agriculture, mining, logging, and urban development. Even when fragments of the original habitat are left, gene flow and number of pollinators are significantly reduced. Biologists now agree that we are entering a period of extinction not experienced since the end of the Cretaceous Period. Although we have the technology to reverse most of the trends, the commitment to do so regardless of the costs involved simply is not there on a worldwide scale when the pressures caused by overpopulation command different priorities.

The Orchid Action Plan chronicles the threats to certain critical species, but more importantly to critical habitats that host extraordinarily high orchid diversity and endemism. It explores and recommends specific ways that national and local government legislators, scientists, and orchid conservationists and growers can all help to reverse present trends. The facts and viewpoints presented in this comprehensive document update and supplement the information available to conservation organizations and agencies throughout the world so that they can lobby their appropriate government offices more effectively.

The first half of the Plan discusses 1) the unique biology of the orchid family; 2) threats posed by habitat loss and over collecting; 3) in situ strategies of habitat conservation and management; 4) ex situ strategies of artificial propagation and seed banking; and 5) the desperate need for more research and education from the international level down to the local orchid society. The second half of the Plan details the present status of knowledge, diversity, threats, and case histories in many of those countries or regions richest in orchid species: Mexico, Costa Rica and Panama, Ecuador and neighboring countries, the Guayana region, the United States and Canada, Caribbean Islands, Europe, North Africa, the Near East, North Asia and Japan, India, Africa, Madagascar and surrounding islands, Australia, south-east Asia, and the south-west Pacific islands.

This Action Plan advocates dual strategies to conserve orchid diversity: establishing in situ protection of natural habitats and promoting trade of artificially propagated plants and cut flowers. Among the specific priority actions recommended at the close of the Plan are the following:

- Preparation of global checklists of orchid species and identification of areas of high biodiversity;
- Legislation and funding to protect, research, and properly manage and monitor such areas;
- Availability of propagation material of rare and new species for commercial development, preferably in those countries where the species are native, thereby reducing demand for wild-collected plants;
- Responsible salvage of orchid plants from areas of deforestation where appropriate, followed by artificial propagation and distribution;
- Preparation of educational programs on orchids and their role in biodiversity by orchid societies and botanical gardens for the general public;
- More active registration of bona fide herbaria and scientific institutions belonging to CITES party countries to enable freer movement of pressed and liquid-preserved plant materials for scientific purposes;
- Sharing of plants, seeds, and pollen among orchid growers and botanical gardens.

Reprinted from *Orchids: Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan*.