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Propagating Medicinal Plants to Conserve Natural Populations and Sustainable Supply for the Traditional Healing Community in South Africa[®]

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**What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882)**

INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years, before the advent of modern allopathic medicine, indigenous people on all the continents on earth practiced traditional medicine. Each ethnic grouping developed a system of healing in which they interwove the natural resources, plants, animals, and geology existing in their area with their cultures and belief systems.

Collectively we now refer to these historic systems of healing as “Traditional and Indigenous Medicine.”

For a while it seemed as if the genesis of modern, western medicine was leading to the demise of many of these systems of healing. The West with its commitment to scientific methodology, considered traditional healing simple superstition.

However, given the movement towards natural living that has been taking place in recent years, a new feverish interest in the art of traditional and alternative healing has developed. Traditional healing systems all over the globe are now being studied with great interest by western scientists.

During the nearly 100 years in which modern pharmaceutical development dominated the Western healthcare environment, 65% to 80% of the world's population continued relying on traditional medicine as their principal form of health care (The World Health Organization).

In South Africa, Africa as a whole, and many other developing countries of the world traditional healing is flourishing. It is financial, cultural, and geographical barriers to modern allopathic medicine that motivate people to visit traditional healers. Though it is clear that many of the traditional healing practices are not able to restore health according to any scientific understanding of healing, people's belief in these systems is what keeps them popular.

Many self-terminating diseases would heal naturally without medicine, traditional or otherwise. People, however, need the attention, caring environment, and rituals to lead them on their path to recovery.

In South Africa, as in most African countries, population numbers are rising steadily. As the number of people using indigenous medicine increases so does the pressure on the natural populations of plants from which the medicine is brewed. It has therefore become one of our national priorities to prevent the extinction of these species of medicinal plants. Saving these species is relevant from a conservation perspective, but it is also important that the plants will continue to be available for medicinal consumption.