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## Wild and certified, but is it sustainable?

*Out of the 40,000 to 50,000 medicinal and aromatic plant species used by mankind, about 2,500 species are internationally traded. Only a few hundred of them are commercially cultivated, while most are collected from the wild. Wild collection, however, is often not sustainable. Is the organic sector's involvement (market demand and certification) increasing the danger of over exploitation or contributing to better management with its standardisation and verification methods. These and other issues surrounding wild collection were explored at a seminar on Organic Wild Collection organised by IFOAM at BioFach 2005<sup>1</sup>.*

**T**he International Union for Nature Conservation (IUNC) estimates that about 4,000 wild species are endangered, either due to over-harvesting or from habitat loss. Not only is biodiversity at stake, but species loss also threatens traditional health care of people and livestock. According to the World Health Organisation, the majority of mankind depends on traditional plant medicines. Sustainable collection methods are currently under discussion within the nature conservation community.

One of the principles of the Convention on Biological Diversity, developed in 1992 by the UN and signed by almost 150 nations, is that 'sustainable use of natural resources provides economic incentives for their conservation'. Sustainable use of wild herbs, for example, can

• Secure incomes for rural households.

- Conserve traditional knowledge and cultural identity.
- Maintain genetic diversity of plant populations.

In the transition countries of Central Europe the science of wild collection was a well supported during communist times. Reportedly, there are databases available that are comprehensive enough to determine the amounts of plant matter available for collection, as well as the best times for collection, and the time needed for renewal. In Georgia, for example, a commission of botanists produced a map of such data. Where there is no data available, the 'Precautionary Principle' is applied.

At the BioFach seminar experts deemed it is feasible to develop a risk assessment to identify vulnerable species. All agreed that standards need to

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