On 17 May 2022 at the David Attenborough Building in Cambridge, UK, Northumbria University in partnership with [TRAFFIC](https://www.traffic.org/) hosted a workshop about the current state of knowledge regarding plant protection from a global perspective. The workshop was hybrid event with 12 people attending in person and 15 people attending online.

The global wildlife trade has been thrust into the international discourse considering the corona virus pandemic and that humans are responsible for the current sixth mass extinction. Debates are ongoing as to how to reform and strengthen the current international legal framework, in order to mitigate the risks connected with the legal trade and effectively tackle its illegal dimension. The UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded [Professor Tanya Wyatt](https://researchportal.northumbria.ac.uk/en/persons/tanya-wyatt) of Northumbria University to research the [legal implementation of and compliance with](http://drtwyatt.weebly.com/cites-implementation-and-compliance.html) the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES - the main global instrument for regulating international wildlife trade). This workshop is one of four funded by AHRC ‘Follow on Funding’ to share the findings of the original research, but also to explore in more depth how wildlife, which includes plants, can better be protected[[1]](#footnote-25842).

This workshop featured five speakers outlining the global wild plant trade and relevant legislation as well as the importance of foregrounding plant conservation and sustainable use. The breakout portion of the workshop focused on the barriers and improvements that could be made to better protect plants from overexploitation, and illegal and unsustainable trade.

Professor Wyatt first spoke about “Are plants legally wildlife?” which outlined how legislation in numerous countries does not define plants as wildlife, thus potentially leading to plants not being protected under such legislation. She was followed by Anastasiya Timoshyna of TRAFFIC and the IUCN SSC Plant Conservation Committee, and Sara Oldfield of the IUCN SSC Global Tree Specialist Group talking about “Trade in plant resources: what we know and why it is important?”. They gave a global overview of plant trade and what the consequences are of overexploitation and unsustainable practices. The next presentation was “WildCheck: unhiding the wild plant ingredients in trade – for governments, private sector and investors” by Caitlin Schindler of TRAFFIC. She introduced this project that highlights how many of our everyday food items contain wild-sourced plants and how important it is that this is managed sustainably. Finally, Dr Carly Cowell of the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew joined remotely to talk about “Enforcing wildlife trade regulations: The implications of plant blindness”. Dr Cowell made a powerful case for why plant blindness—a form of speciesism against plants that results in them largely being ignored—can hurt conservation efforts.

The presentations set the background for four more in-depth group discussions around the listed questions.

GROUP 1 - What are the barriers to plants being included in wildlife protection legislation?

* Capacity
* Resources
* Complexity
* Political will/priority
* Usable legislation that includes plants
* Data
  + Lack of and/or proprietary
* Lack of industry engagement or ignorance
* Plant blindness
* Corruption
* Wildlife authorities and policy makers focus on animals. The consequences for plants are often not considered (i.e., CITES ban in Nepal targeting animals affected plant essential oils trade that was not predicted)
* Listings driven by interest groups and animal welfare groups for animals, where there is not an equivalent champion or lobby group for plants
* The tension between ecosystem protection vs species protection approaches

GROUP 2 - What are the benefits and challenges to a sustainable use approach?

The benefits were thought to be:

* Empowerment of local communities
* Utilisation benefits- everyone still has access, especially for not easily cultivated species
* Sustainable trades, the plant value is recognised
* Longterm availability of resources (illegal trade is generally short term)
* Recognise and support sustainable trade for long term livelihoods
* Stopping trade can have worse knock-on repercussions, which is why sustainability is good
* Sustainable use means that there can be usage and rights given to suppliers in a much better way

The challenges were thought to be:

* Power dynamics
  + Who is benefiting? Will sustainability function well or is it not needed? Balancing the rights and interests of all users as well as considering access.
* The need for monitoring systems at all levels (local, state and national) that can operate with limited or low capacity
* Government subsidies and policies that may not care about sustainable use, prioritise other uses (i.e., logging and mining) to create jobs, and can also create various pressures (short-term thinking for immediate wealth)
* Understanding demand/consumer culture, harvesting culture (i.e., specialists vs opportunists), and selling patterns (I.e., wholesalers vs individuals) and having the data to do so, which will underpin decision making as well as enforcement (intelligence-led policing)
* Understanding the role and the influence of intermediaries
* Securing cooperation between countries, where they would institute reciprocal measures across jurisdictions to support species (not to support their national industries)
* Getting consumers to stand up for their rights; having consumers ask questions like where does this come from, do you have permits, and so forth

The opportunities were thought to be:

* Use timber as a model – protecting species under legislation rather than voluntary conventions/participatory
* Identify gaps in legislation; try to horizon scan to determine this is where species will be targeted next

GROUP 3 - What steps can be taken to improve existing legislation or international conventions as far as trade in plants is concerned?

International law is largely a contradiction in terms, so the lack of implementation of current conventions, namely CITES, is a major problem. CITES is difficult to implement, difficult for traders to follow, and the permits are commonly forged or fraudulent. As long as CITES implementation is uneven across members, it will be hobbled as an international policy tool for responding to plant trades. This connects to the gap between the international level in terms of trade conventions and national level legislation. In this regard, there is sometimes the need for more specific, bilateral agreements (i.e., Nepal and India, the US and Korea, etc.). In addition, the difference across border countries in terms of legislation can hinder wildlife protection. Furthermore, CITES and current legislation does not have the capacity to respond quickly to new and emergent trades, especially those with rapid escalations like succulents in South Africa. Perhaps, empowerment in terms of knowledge and response of ‘lower’ level official, guards, and so forth could help with enforcement. Some scholars claim that trade bans are not working for animals; even less is known about the consequences of trade bans for plants.

GROUP 4 - What other mechanisms besides the law can be used to protect and ensure sustainable use of plants?

* Volunteer compliance, such as certification and community engagement (from local communities to industry level)
* Changing consumer behavior, which could help with market demand for certified products
* Biodiversity management plans (honey bush tea is a good example in South Africa)
* Industry weekends and local festivals, where companies, pickers, consumers and other relevant stakeholders come together to promote the product and its sustainable use (again using the honey bush tea as a great example)
* Using useful plants in restoration projects
* Promotion of cultivation of plants instead of collection from the wild.
  + In Lebanon, where the influx of Syrian refugees has been putting more pressure in the collection of wild plants. They have a grant that pays nurseries to grow those plants, and they are then given for free to local communities for growing them in terraces

Thank you to the participants and Group facilitators for taking part.

Visit the [British Society of Criminology’s Green Criminology Research Network’s YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/user/ESRCGreenCrime) Channel for a recording of the workshop as well as other videos from the other workshops.

1. The other discussions are: ‘A Discussion of Tackling Illicit Wildlife Trafficking through an Additional Protocol to the UN Convention on Transnational Organised Crime’ in Vienna, Austria, in partnership with the [Global Initiative to End Wildlife Crime](https://endwildlifecrime.org/) (EWC), and the [Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime](https://globalinitiative.net/) (GI-TOC) on 24 February 2022, ‘Wildlife and the Law: Implications and Ways Forward’ in Portland, Oregon, in partnership with [Global Law Alliance for Animals and the Environment (GLA)](https://law.lclark.edu/clinics/global-law-alliance-for-animals-and-the-environment/) and the [Center for Animal Law Studies (CALS) on 15 April 2022,](https://law.lclark.edu/centers/animal_law_studies/) ‘Wildlife Trade and Public Health’ online in partnership with the [Wildlife Conservation Society](https://www.wcs.org/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwn4qWBhCvARIsAFNAMig24o-NY4iX8_pWyTVCJ_BIcxKvIO8zrmmRxk6X_TlJQZNwNCipyRUaAvlFEALw_wcB) 25 May 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-25842)