

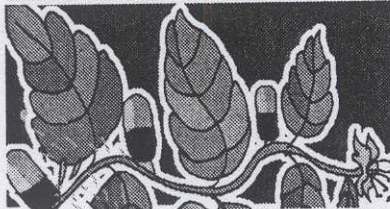
Preserving bio-diversity

GUEST COLUMN

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MEDICINAL PLANTS TRADED

| Category | No. | % |
|-------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Annuals and Biennials | 30 | 38 |
| Perennial and Destructive | 13 | 17 |
| Perennial and Non Destructive | 35 | 45 |
| Total | 78 | 100 |



- The purpose of the bio-diversity law should be to enhance the scientific utilisation of sustainable resources
- It is undeniable that there is a crying need to prevent the erosion of bio-diversity in the country
- Forest dept should plant the endangered species of trees in waste and degraded forest land in an organised manner

clear, there is no justification to impose stringent punishment for its violation. These ambiguities and stringent, draconian measures will adversely affect over two crore people comprising collectors, traders of all categories, manufacturers and exporters. The purpose of this regulatory measure should be to enhance the scientific utilisation of sustainable resources and prevent the extinction of any bio-resource.

If the Biological Diversity Act and rules are to be implemented, it will require a huge organisation with commensurate infrastructure. It is also necessary to evolve a

step by step approach, so that the mechanism could gradually be geared up to meet the objective.

The first step is to focus on and protect the endangered species, which are in the red list. Reserve forests are already identified, which are veritable source of certain species of medicinal plants. These forests should be developed as havens of bio-diversity. From the recent market survey conducted by the ministry of environment and forests with FRLHT, a Bangalore based NGO, 78 medicinal plants, which are in trade in India, were identified. (See table)

The destructive collection is probably happening only in the case of perennial and destructive plants constituting 17% of the total number of medicinal plants traded in India. These trees require collectors trained in scientific collection of plant parts. Further, out of the 78 plants identified, 40 are already under cultivation. This number is likely to increase with demand.

In a situation where destruction becomes unavoidable, as in the case of heart wood, the forest department should come forward to plant these trees in waste and degraded forest land in an organised manner. This can be done in consultation with Medicinal Plant Board and industry.

The annuals and biennials, which have a very short life span, perish after their life cycle, irrespective of their utilisation. It is necessary to utilise these herbs rather than perennials, which take a long time to grow. Adequate number of healthy plants and seeds should be left behind for regeneration during the collection of the annuals.

The key to a balanced strategy of promoting both conservation and utilisation of bio-diversity is imparting training to collectors for sustainable and scientific collection and also establishing mechanisms which generate a sense of ownership of the crop among them.

(The author is CMD, Natural Remedies Private Ltd)

INDIA is the eighth largest country having a total of around 47,000 plant species, out of which more than 7,500 species are cited as medicinal plants. Among these medicinal plants only 800 species are claimed to be in use and around 120 species are used in large quantities. This constitutes only about 1.6% of the total number of medicinal plants and around 0.25% of the total number of plant species in India. This scenario indicates a huge potential in this market.

It is found that 80% of the global population uses traditional herbal system of medicine. This global swing towards herbal medicine is due to its low cost, efficacy, safety and negligible side effects. The task force appointed by the Planning Commission in June 1999 suggested export targets of Rs 3,000 crore by 2005 and Rs 10,000 crore by 2010 for medicinal plant-based products. This reflects a need for a higher level of utilisation of medicinal plants.

As per the Indian Institute of Forest Management, Bhopal, India's forest cover is only to the extent of 18-19% against the ideal 33%. While commercial utilisation is blamed as the sole factor adversely impinging on forest cover, there are other causal factors, viz., deforestation, commercial utilisation, fire, developmental activities and over-population.

It is undeniable that there is a crying need to prevent the erosion of bio-diversity in the country. It is also necessary to enhance prudent utilisation through sustainable collection of medicinal plants, which are in abundance and have remained unutilised since ages. In formulating the Acts and rules on bio-diversity, the government is focusing only on controlling the commercial utilisation of biological resources. The other factors receive cursory attention. The national policy should bring a balance between the twin objectives of conservation and utilisation.

The Biological Diversity Act, 2002 is fraught with ambiguity. Unless the Act is