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Safeguarding Traditional Knowledge: A Guide to Medicinal Plants in North Africa

Granada, 2 February 2006. IUCN – The World Conservation Union has been working on a programme linking traditional knowledge and poverty alleviation in North Africa. One of the outputs of this programme is “A Guide to Medicinal Plants in North Africa”, which was compiled by a group of experts in an effort to conserve and promote traditional knowledge of local communities and increase awareness of endangered and threatened plants. This Guide is being launched during the IV Meeting of the AD HOC Open Ended Working Group on Access and Benefit Sharing, which is taking place in Granada. The IUCN programme in North Africa was supported by The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

North Africa has one of the oldest and richest traditions associated with the use of medicinal plants. Medicinal plants are important for the people of the region, especially in rural areas, as in many places, they are the only source of medicine available. Even in many urban areas, the prices of modern medicines are increasing, and people are turning back to traditional plant remedies.

The demand for medicinal plants is currently increasing in both developed and developing countries, because of their accessibility and affordable costs and the growing recognition that natural products have fewer side effects. Therefore a number of important plant species have become scarce in areas where they were previously abundant and some species may become threatened with extinction, if their collection and use is not regulated.

The theme of medicinal plants was a good entry point for biodiversity conservation and was relevant to most countries in North Africa. The scientific work of the Programme provided ample knowledge on methods to germinate, propagate, transplant and cultivate the plants, therefore providing an alternative to their collection and decline from the wild.

Wild natural resources bring important benefits, but these are often unknown. The forms of uses are often varied and depend on local knowledge, which is based on traditional techniques linked to local identity. The majority of the material which is found in this Guide was collected through a long process of interviews and information gathering from the Bedouin communities and herbalists who still possess the information, and transfer it from generation to the other through word of mouth. This Guide will help in safeguarding this knowledge for future generations as well as ensure it is available for further investigation and research.

The IUCN Programme in North Africa tested conservation and related income generating activities in the field that now offer a strong potential for larger scale implementation. The Programme has developed pilot production models for a wide array of medicinal plants that have a sustained demand at the national, regional, and international levels.

The background knowledge gained on medicinal plants through their cultivation and the compiling of the Guide on Medicinal Plants should be used further to build synergies with the various international processes and multilateral environmental commitments.

MORE INFORMATION ON THE NORTH AFRICA BIODIVERSITY PROGRAMME:

<http://iucn.org/places/medoffice/nabp/index.html>

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