

Change of fortunes for threatened plants

When the Society added Flora to its name and remit in 1980 it was in recognition that plants were neglected in conservation terms. They were taken for granted, an almost invisible backcloth to the dramas of saving wild animals. Fourteen years on there are changes for the better. To date, none of the 25 IUCN/Species Survival Commission Action Plans is for plants, but two, for Pteridophytes and palms, are nearing completion; others are in an advanced stage of preparation – for cacti and succulents, and orchids; and more are in the planning stage – for bryophytes and conifers and cycads. More are urgently needed, including one for carnivorous plants. The new SSC Plant Task Force, which met for the first time in November 1993, with much support and input from FFPS, and the appointment of an SSC Plant Officer should help spur progress.

The FFPS plant work has expanded considerably since its early days, when it conducted studies on the trade in mahoganies and orchids. The Society now has conservation projects for bulbous and carnivorous plants, ebonies and rosewoods, and the terrestrial orchids that are used to make the drink salep in Turkey, where it also has just started a Plant Diversity Programme. But mahoganies, the focus of our early concerns (*Oryx*, 17 [2], 88–92), are still in grave danger.

Mahogany is a trade name applied to stable, dark-red, tropical hardwoods noted for their attractive appearance and good working qualities. They are highly valued and in much demand. American mahogany is derived from *Swietenia* spp., which are confined to the neotropics, while African mahoganies belong to the genera *Khaya* and *Entandrophragma*. All are being extracted at a rate that far exceeds replenishment and illegal logging of American mahoganies is now occurring within reserves.

The FFPS survey in 1982 recommended listing mahogany species of the genera *Swietenia*, *Entandrophragma* and *Khaya* on CITES appendices as being a way to monitor the trade and

halt the decline. At the time, the Pacific coast mahogany *Swietenia humilis* was already listed on CITES Appendix II and at the last meeting of the Parties to CITES in Japan in March 1992, Cuban mahogany *Swietenia mahagoni* was included in Appendix II, although a proposal to list Brazilian or big-leaf mahogany *Swietenia macrophylla*, which occurs from South America to Mexico, was withdrawn under severe pressure from timber trade interests.

As the Ninth Meeting of the Parties to CITES approaches the Society is supporting a renewed attempt for Appendix II listing of mahoganies. In January the USA published in its Federal Register notice of a plan to propose listing *Swietenia macrophylla* (including its natural hybrid with *S. mahagoni* – *S. aubrevilleana*), and the genera *Khaya* and *Entandrophragma* on Appendix II. However, the US Fish and Wildlife Service states that 'information is desired, particularly on populations of each species that are functioning naturally and are effectively safe from habitat loss or exploitation'. It is hoped that the implication is not that receipt of such information could preclude the submission of an Appendix II listing proposal. If protection for *Swietenia* is enhanced the timber trade will without doubt increasingly switch its attention back to *Khaya* and *Entandrophragma*. There are only a few areas of Africa where the timber trade has yet to gain access, for example parts of the Congo Basin, whose forests contain *Khaya* spp. and *Entandrophragma* spp. Elsewhere African mahoganies have already suffered massive declines and remain in strong demand. Listing all three genera on Appendix II should improve the prospects for all the species throughout their ranges.

While there will undoubtedly be opposition to this proposal, it should be remembered that listing a species on Appendix II of CITES is not a ban on trade but rather a means of monitoring it to ensure that it is sustainable into the future. Some of the range states in Africa already have domestic legislation to protect species of *Khaya* and *Entandrophragma* and listing on CITES Appendix II will do much to support and strengthen these measures.

Editor