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The Seductive Orchid

A Look into the Justifications and Motivations
Behind the Illicit Flora Economy

Ardea Smith

In a world that is focused on conserving what is deemed ‘sexy’ no creature better fits this description than the exotic and colorful orchid. The history of this often delicately depicted flora is a sordid tale that spans the globe, from the murky swamps of the Fakahatchee State Preserve in Florida to the Amazonian tropics of Brazil and Borneo where deadly tropical diseases and harsh wilderness threaten orchid hunters at every turn. Set against the backdrop of such foreboding environments, the orchid stands out as a sophisticated version of the wild area in which it lives, its vibrant colors and twisted leaves tempered by its smooth petals and soft curves. “Orchids are subtle, delicate, voluptuous and masters of disguise. They take on the shapes, scents and colours that seduce the insects they feed upon. But they are best of all at seducing humans” (You can get off alcohol and drugs, but you can never get off orchids. Never 2006). How have orchids become so closely associated with such avid exotic sexual appeal? One of the primary interests in writing this paper was to understand how seduction became so closely associated with orchids and how this definitional framework for understanding orchids in the Western world influences or drives the illicit orchid market. The metaphors and descriptors governing the orchid market connect directly to the current motivations and justifications used by orchid smugglers and orchid consumers to continue their hunt for wild flora. An investigation into the behavioral component of the illicit orchid trade presents some clues to the obstacles facing the crackdown on orchid smuggling but also prompts a larger question; should we as citizens care and work to change the behavior of orchid smugglers? Biodiversity and sustainability of our collective ecosystem are two powerful motivators to stop the harvesting of wild orchids. However, in assessing the overall damage of the wild orchid industry to the environment a study of this illicit

economy runs into the problem of the “politics of numbers” (Dillman 2012) that encompasses issues of rarity and taxonomy. With a sometimes-cloudy view of the dangers of continued orchid trafficking, it is difficult to always formulate and justify a need to curb orchid smuggling activities. The solutions offered in this paper encapsulate the difficulties of dealing with an illicit economy and in particular, the seductive orchid.

*“A goddess of magnificent beauty, clad in sparkling raiment of silk, came to Java wishing to inspire the natives with finer feelings. Being gross and perverse people, they attacked her and chased her into the deep forest. Weary and sad, she laid her celestial scarf upon the rocks, then turned in great wrath toward the people. Now realizing they beheld a goddess, they implored her pardon and begged her to leave her scarf. She let them see it once more before returning to heaven. But several fragments were left behind on the sharp rocks. They were transformed and gave rise to leaves resembling silken finery... Thus the pure joy of the cloisonné green leaves of *Macodes petola*, with their satiny purple glints and shining veins which scintillate like small fragments of gold, has been conserved.”*

-Javanese myth (Withner 1959, 9)

For the Javanese, orchids are the remnants of a merciful goddess’s divine scarf, its leaves and petals a reflection of the beauty of the heavens. In China, the orchid was the inspiration for calligraphic artwork and incorporated into the designs of furniture, rugs, pottery, and metalwork (Withner 1959, 9-12). For the scholar Confucius, the orchid was “The King of the Fragrant Plants” (Withner 1959, 10). Around the world orchids have

long been romanticized as the epitome of beauty and mystique however, these aspects of the orchid are far overshadowed by its definition as a sexual being. Hieronymus Tragus was a German botanist who lived from 1498 until 1554. Tragus attempted to organize all known living species into categories reflective of their appearance and had some interesting ideas about the origins of the orchid. At this time in history scientists and citizens adhered to the belief that certain animal species, especially mammals, were the fathers of insect species. For example, bulls were understood to be the creators of bees and horses spawned wasps. Tragus noted that the petal formation, coloring, and overall shape of many orchids mimicked that of insects. Following the logic of mammal-insect creation Tragus posited that orchids must be the sisters and brothers of insects and thus the sons and daughters of mammals. When a horse or bull ejaculated, the semen that fell to the ground provided the seeds from which orchids grow (Withner 1959, 8; History of Horticulture 2002). A provocative understanding of plant life in any era, the European understanding of the origins of the orchid in the 15th century was only one instance of the association of orchids with sex. “*Orchis maculata* was used as an aphrodisiac in late-medieval Iceland. On a similar note, the chewed stem of the *Lissochilus* orchid was known to produce powerful erections of the penis among Lobedu tribesmen in Transvaal as recently as 1962” (Hansen 2000, 25). For centuries, orchids have been clearly associated with sexual behavior.

Moreover, orchids petals, folds, and shapes have often been described as the reincarnation of human sexual organs in plant form. The association with orchids and genitalia is particularly evident during the Victorian era. With the expanse of the British Empire beginning in the 18th century English ships traveled the high seas in the hopes of

procuring valuable foreign goods (Hansen 2000, 63). Trips to Tahiti, Australia, Indonesia, and New Zealand were organized in which never before seen species of plants, birds, cats, and reptiles were studied and then caught, killed and/or transported back to awe and honor the King (Gribbin and Gribbin 2008, 69, 78-85). The orchid was one such specimen that inspired awe. At a time when feminine virtue, innocence, and obedience were upheld as the marker of a true lady, the orchid was considered shockingly sexual and exotic. The curves of its inner petals, reminiscent of the folds of a woman's genitals, insured that orchids functioned something like a pornographic magazine, pored over in private but unacknowledged and unacceptable for public consumption. Orchids were reserved for the eyes of rich Victorian men because the blossoms were believed to overwhelm and violate the sensibilities of innocent Victorian women (Oliver 2004). Today, the shapes of orchids are seen as no less sensual. Eric Hansen's description of a bodice ripper orchid makes the reader positively blush. "... 'Bodice ripper?' I took a closer look at the flower. The shiny, candy-apple-red staminode that covered the reproductive organs was shaped like the extended tongue identical to the Rolling Stones logo. This shocking protrusion nestled in the cleavage of two blushing petals then dropped down as if to lick the tip of an inverted pouch that looked like the head of an engorged penis. The blatant carnality of Magic Lantern was unmistakable..." (Hansen 2000, 30) From the 18th century to present day, orchid flowers high status in society has been derived partially from their beauty but more importantly, from their potent sensuality.

During this time, orchids were also valued among the wealthy because of their potential rarity and the mode of their discovery. The flora species that wealthy orchid enthusiasts sought after were neither the result of a seed packet nor were they cultivated

in a garden and sold through a nursery. Domesticated orchid species were dismissed as pretty but common and tame. For the uncommon and unique orchids that would be the star of a flora collection, collectors had to venture into the raw and dangerous jungle or hire someone to risk their lives for them. It was during this time that orchids, rather than being viewed as a plant that remains rooted to one spot, became a simile for exotic beasts like a jaguar or a lion that stalk the forest and bares its fangs. Orchid enthusiasts were labeled hunters who tracked down and captured wild orchid species. “In order to meet the demand for more and more and more, orchid hunters went to unprecedented lengths, being prepared to travel far through unmapped and dangerous country simply on the hint that a new species...To some hunters, finding an unknown species was the pinnacle of all their professional ambitions. To the romantic adventurers among their number, orchid hunting was living out a King Solomon’s Mines existence” (Whittle 1970, 10-11). The fate of many of these hunters added to the dangerous intrigue surrounding the orchid. David Bowman, after investing time and money in collection of a vast number of new plants in South America was robbed and he later died of dysentery in Colombia (Whittle 1970, 143-144). Albert Millican was stabbed to death (Munera 2005). “In 1901, eight orchid hunters went on an expedition to the Philippines. Within a month one was eaten by a tiger, another was drenched with oil and burned alive, five vanished and were never seen again, and one walked out of the forest with 7,000 orchid specimens” (Orchid Hunter 2002). Competition among the orchid hunters sometimes led to murder and the destruction of rivals orchid collections. All of these stories of murder, mayhem, and intrigue governing the early orchid trade helped cement wild orchid species as sexual,

wild, rare, creatures that bestowed great prestige upon Western orchid collectors lucky enough to tame them.

Now, over 200 years later, orchids have become much more widely available to the general public. Orchids are the number-one selling potted flowering plant in the United States with a value of over 171 million dollars per year (USDA Floriculture Crops 2010, 7, 42). A single plant can be found for \$20 or less at a variety of gardening centers and a quick perusal of the UPS library found several do it yourself orchid cultivation books from as early as 1948. As John Watkins writes in *ABC of Orchid Growing* (1948), “The single factor that has added the greatest impetus to the growing of orchids is the phenomenal success of growing seedlings...This one technique has revolutionized the orchid business...Steadily and surely, the growing of orchids is passing from the conservatories of wealthy fanciers to smaller commercial rangers and to the thousands of growers of moderate means...Through the efforts of scientific investigators at research institutions and of expert private growers, more and more facts are being made known, with the result that orchid culture has lost much of its mystery...” (vi-vii)

While the facts do show that orchids are now easily available to those with fewer resources and knowledge about culturing of orchids is no longer such a mystery, the orchid has maintained its status symbol as potentially wild, seductive, and exclusively wealthy mans pursuit. This is because the current orchid market is segmented between the houseplant consumers and the wealthy orchid collectors. There is a large difference between the household with a potted orchid bought from a Wal-Mart or local gardening center and the collector willing to spend \$20,000 dollars on a single kovachii orchid from Peru (Blooming Mad 2003) For the powerful and wealthy, the tradition of seeking out

exotic orchids in dangerous conditions has only intensified despite advances in farming, cultivation, and cloning techniques. Their obsession spurs on an illegal trade of endangered and rare orchids protected under CITES (Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), an international treaty working towards conservation and continued biodiversity. Why have elites continued to seek out endangered orchids?

The strongest and most widely spouted motivation for the continued poaching of endangered orchids by orchid collectors is that wild orchids are superior to cloned or cultivated orchids. Behind each rare orchid lies the vast and rich history of orchid collecting, a combination of tall tales and real life dramas involving sex, murder, sabotage, and 'the hunt.' Serious orchid collectors in the twenty first century see themselves as the titleholders to an exclusive legacy of adventurers. Tom Dyke is one such modern day orchid hunter. In 2000, he set out into the Colombia jungle in search of a rare orchid that would cement his status among the elite collectors. Only 6 days into his trip he was ambushed by the FARC rebels and held hostage for nine months (Orchid Hunter Transcripts 2002). While he ended up returning to Britain empty handed Dyke's story garnered him television specials and solidified his image as an orchid hunter equal to the romanticized plant hunters of the 18th and 19th century. For Dyke and many others, cultivated orchids, grown in sterile lab environments, perhaps exact clones of another flower, lack that association with wild, rare, and untamed beauty. "To serious orchid collectors, danger is value. Most orchid varieties can be easily grown in nurseries, but the plants produced in such controlled conditions suffer from what one dealer describes as "the stigma of perfection" Their colours may be artificially bright, their petal structure

too uniform. Prettified and no challenge to obtain, they lack the sensual, quasi-mystical aura of wild orchids. In the surreal demi-monde of orchidelirium, such plants are impostors. Only the blooms raised by nature can be considered authentic” (You can get off alcohol and drugs, but you can never get off orchids. Never 2006). This belief in an ‘authentic bloom’ makes any effort to halt the illegal orchid trade extremely difficult. Policymakers must understand that simply offering a better supply of rare orchids species at nurseries and orchid farms cannot stop the illegal trade in orchids. Orchidelirium is spurred on by the importance of the historically derived definition of an orchid. Collectors firmly believe in the superiority of the wild orchid because of its history of contact with the Western world has turned it into a symbol of sensuality, adventure, danger, and rarity. Thus, understanding the historically formed definition of the orchid helps us understand orchid collectors major motivation for continuing to plunder and smuggle orchids and the obstacles these present to conservation efforts.

In tandem with orchid collectors motivation for spurring on the illegal trade in rare orchids, orchid collectors primary justification for harvesting wild orchids is based on their perspective of themselves as conservationists. Orchids first made their appearance in Britain at the behest of the monarchy, which sought to become the most scientifically advanced nation on earth (Gribbin and Gribbin 2008, 69) To achieve this goal the King did not just send out lackeys to find and bring back plants and animals, he sent out renowned botanists, naturalists, and scientists. They were tasked with creating sketches of new plants and animals, classifying them, learning their properties, and forming a more coherent picture of the natural world. Orchid collectors view themselves as conservationists, following in the footsteps of the original colonial naturalists.

Deforestation, land conversion, and urbanization have all contributed to the destruction of many of the natural habitats of wild and rare orchids. Local and national laws in places like Indonesia and Brazil have failed to properly monitor and protect their valuable forests and jungles (Broich, Stolle, and Hansen 2011) Orchid collectors question the right of states to prohibit the exportation of rare and valuable orchids if they are simply going to be destroyed (Ferrell 1995, 2). Orchid collectors also ask whether environmentalists should rely on CITES to save orchids when it can't even maintain and protect their surrounding habitat. CITES is a treaty narrowly focused on the trade of endangered plants and animals across national borders. CITES provides the funding and framework for a licensing system that regulates the legal transportation of animals and plants across borders and funds border protection that aims to stop illegal transnational transactions (How CITES Works). Little in CITES deals with the root problems such as habitat destruction or the basic act of removing orchids from their natural habitat. "...It is perfectly legal to flood an orchid habitat with a hydro-electric dam, log it, level the hillsides for a road, build a golf course on the site, or burn the jungle to the ground for agricultural purposes, but CITES influence and rules make it extremely difficult, if not impossible to salvage the plants and sell them" (Hansen 2000, 17).

Collectors argue that their work helps uncover never before seen orchid species and save them from being destroyed because of logging and the conversion of forest to farmland. "Herman [an orchid collector] recalled a plane flight to Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 1981: "Looking out the window, I counted 60 fires," he said. "What they were doing was burning jungle, burning forests, and in every one of those forests they were killing all the orchids that were in there."..." (Ferrell 1995, 3). Hunters and collectors justify their

actions on environmental grounds and blame bad trade regulations for the loss of orchid species. CITES and national laws prohibiting the importation or exportation of rare orchids stifles 'conservationists' ability to move endangered orchid species out of areas threatened by logging or encroaching farmers.

To add insult to injury, orchid specialists claim that CITES authorities who formulate policy on combating the illegal orchid trade are lawyers, not botanists, with none of the necessary expertise to create good policy (Hansen 2000,161). Even those charged with monitoring the shipment of orchids across borders are ill informed about the wide variety of orchid species (over 25,000 wild species and 100,000 cultivated hybrids) (Hansen 2000, 59). As an example, "The German customs people use a book called A Dictionary of the Flowering Plants and Ferns, by J. C. Willis, as their bible for identifying plant species...that book is several decades out of date...many of the orchid species names are no longer valid, and...it is not even a taxonomic book that is recognized by botanists" (Hansen 2000, 162). Thus, orchid collectors are forced, because of bad system, to take matters into their own hands to conserve and protect the orchid species of the world.

As a final justification for the removal of orchids from their natural habitat orchid collectors contend that they, above all others, have the means to care for these rare and wonderful flowers. As devoted subjects to this flora, they are willing and able to give the time and energy it takes to nurture an orchid. "One prominent New York collector with 3,000 rare orchids has a special greenhouse on top of his apartment with a cloud-making system and fans designed to simulate tropical breezes" (You can get off alcohol and drugs, but you can never get off orchids. Never 2006). There is also a strong market for

orchid hotels, orchid babysitters, and orchid physicians due to the fervent attention collectors' shower onto their beloved flora. Collectors argue they have the resources necessary to foster the growth of rare orchid species, especially those destined to be cut down to make way for new farm land or destroyed by logging and dams.

Given the justifications laid out by orchid collectors, the question to ask is, should we, as the public, be worried about the illegal trade in orchids? Though orchid collectors fail to acknowledge this fact, the very act of taking orchids from their natural habitat is cause for concern. William F. Laurance discusses the danger of the "erosion of floristic diversity" in his article *Fragmentation and Plant Communities* (eds. Bierregaard, Gascon, Lovejoy, and Mesquita 2001, 160-161). First, as rare orchids, which have populated forests, plains, and jungles for millennia, are removed from their natural setting they find it harder to reproduce and new pioneer plants move in to take their place. The habitat changes to favor new plants that gradually crowd out old and valuable orchid species. Losing old-growth orchid species can have a devastating effect on the local ecosystem. Many orchids have evolved to fit the habits of one particular insect and rely on it to reproduce. Its petals, pollen containers, and shape fit perfectly with the behavior of only one wasp or bee. As the orchid species disappears the symbiotic relationship between the wasp and flower disintegrates. The wasp, which depended exclusively on the orchid for its nectar may also vanish. In turn, a small mammal or bug that ate the wasp may find it more difficult to find enough food, and it too is put in danger. The extinction of a single orchid has an exponentially harmful effect on its surrounding environment. The importance of maintaining floristic diversity provides a powerful argument for the halt to the illegal orchid trade.

Environmental arguments for the protection of floristic diversity are complimented by stories about the reckless nature of orchid hunters. In a dramatic article entitled "Call 911-Flowers! Lives Are at Risk!; Botanical Garden Races To Rescue Wild Orchids" (Collins 2005) the tone is similar to a story about innocent babies being smuggled across the border. The plants are described as having been "ripped" (Collins, 2005) from their homes, "sent to their doom, crushed to death" (Collins 2005). The plants are rushed to "intensive care" (Collins 2005) where local botanical societies and institutions assess the grim situation like doctors in an ER room. "It was a race against time, since some of the plants were dehydrated and near death," said Marc Hachadourian, the gardener for [New York Botanical Garden] "We were appalled to see their condition... orchids were wilted, torn, shriveled and severely dehydrated, and there was a lot of mechanical damage [broken stems]. And they hadn't received any sunlight."... (Collins 2005). The article clearly pinpoints collectors as the cause of the orchids suffering. Driven by greed, rather than scientific inquiry, orchid collectors ransack forests and strip them of every last orchid they can find. "...Pristine forests are being picked clean of every orchid plant within reach. There have been some species that have been wiped out--they're now considered extinct--due to collection. This is simply bald-faced greed"(Ferrell 1995, 2). While the behavior in this article may be applicable to a few cases found in the public records, one has to question whether such behavior can be generalized to all collectors. It would seem contrary to an orchid collectors goal to participate in the destruction of the very orchid he or she hopes to make the star of their collection. In *Orchid Fever* (2000) Eric Hansen writes, "One of the many popular myths about orchid collecting describes how rare plants are being thoughtlessly ripped from the

jungle by the tens or hundreds of thousands, jammed into boxes, and later sold, half-dead, for a quick, easy profit. Having watched the process many times, I can assure you that the delicate and time-consuming operation is carried out with the surgical precision of an organ transplant” (78). So, while environmentalists make a convincing argue for the importance of floristic diversity and the dangers of removing orchids from their natural habitats, their attempts to paint orchid collectors as ruthless poachers should be taken with a grain of salt.

On an interesting side note, although environmentalists tend to villainize wealthy orchid collectors in developed countries and publish stories about their greed, some blame rests with local populations eating habits as well. In Zambia both urban and rural citizens share a special affinity for chikanda, a locally made sausage like concoction that can be cooked and eaten with rice or cut and placed in a sandwich. Chikandas main ingredient is the root of orchids, minced and mixed with spices and ground peanuts. In neighboring Tanzania, where chikanda has fallen out of favor, poor villagers are harvest millions of orchids to send across the border into Zambia. “Tim Davenport, a conservation biologist at WCS [Wildlife Conservation Society]...estimates that many species of the wild orchid...will be eliminated within a few years” (Veggie Delight, Eco Disaster 2001). Thousands of miles away, in Istanbul, Turkey, orchid tubers, colloquially known as fox testicles for their shape, are also ground up and made into orchid ice cream (Hansen 2000, 91-92). All of the dried tubers used to make this delicacy come from wild orchids, harvested in the hills of Turkey. “Mohammed’s [fourth-generation ice cream maker and the city’s largest producer] level of production requires approximately two and a half tons of dried orchid tubers each year” (Hansen 2000, 96). Conservationists worry

that the demand for orchid ice cream is a major threat to the endemic orchid species in Turkey and are hoping to discover a synthetic substitute to curb wild orchid harvesting (Hansen 2000, 97).

Although it seems evident that citizens should care about floristic diversity and environmental damage, the previous paragraphs show how difficult it is to create a comprehensive solution. There are so many actors with many different motivations in the illegal trade of orchids. Orchid collectors contribute to the problem by removing orchids from their natural habitat. They blame CITES for its ill informed and enforced laws and believe that circumventing these international regulations is the only way to save the wild orchid species. Locals contribute to the problem through their demand for orchid based products and see the use of orchids as a culturally acceptable practice. Finally, environmentalists tend to dramatize the debate by villainizing particular groups and use the media to foster certain conceptions about who is to blame even though these views may be skewed. Unfortunately, in addition to the multiplicity of actors involved, there is also a larger structural issue of taxonomic confusion that stands in the way of a viable solution to the wild orchid trade.

It seems, according to Yohan Pillon and Mark Chase (2007), scientists have run into issues collecting, identifying, and classifying orchid species. First, there are four times more orchid species than mammal species or bird species. With over 25,000-30,000 wild orchid species and more discovered every few years, the taxonomic list is massive. Many times, only through the work of orchid hunters are new species brought to the attention of the scientific community. There still remains a lot of work to be done to simply find all the orchid species currently on earth. Second, there has been a significant

lack of coordination between various taxonomists from around the world. This has led to a mass of confusion over the proper names of species. An orchid in Germany might be classified under a different name than that used in the U.S. Orchids may also be classified according to different standards. An orchid in Europe may be distinguished by its physical characteristics and placed in a specific species category. That same orchid in the US may be subject to genetic testing and be found to belong to a larger species group that already exists. Pillon and Chase “believe that the popularity of orchids in Europe is responsible for over splitting in this group. Leaving one’s name on an orchid species is a great way to retain a place in posterity. Nevertheless, this is not without consequences for orchid conservation” (2007, 265). Without a comprehensive and unified system for identifying orchid species, agreements like CITES cannot be properly enforced because officials have different opinions on what to look for in shipments of flowers.

The first step towards any comprehensive regulation of or effort to stop the illegal orchid trade in its tracks must be to tackle the structural taxonomy issue. A unified taxonomy system is beneficial to everyone, the collectors, scientists, and environmentalists. Scientists can coordinate information on the number and properties of different orchids and increase their overall knowledge of orchids and their habitats through collaboration. Botanists and naturalists will be better able to distinguish truly endangered species from more common varieties. The ability of scientists to properly rank and classify orchids helps both the environmentalists’ agenda and collectors. Without a basic pool of information on the number of orchid species, their properties, or genetic information it is hard to make clear statements about the perilous condition of orchids when there are so many species and still, so little uniform information.

Environmentalists can make more convincing arguments about the status of particular orchids when everyone agrees on its taxonomic code and show more concrete evidence of particular threatened orchid habitats or species. Collectors, crazed over any and all details about orchid species, will be better able to parse out different species of orchids with new genetic and physical data provided during the taxonomic process. In fact, their knowledge and dealings with particularly rare orchids smuggled from source countries could be a boon of information for scientists hoping to better classify the orchid system.

In turn, a complete and uniform taxonomic system will provide the basis for more effective border patrol. As noted previously, taxonomic codes vary from state to state and orchids deemed endangered in one country are common in another. This confusion drastically undercuts CITES attempt to regulate transnational trade of orchids not to mention the fact that many officials lack basic training to identify orchid species. A new and constant classification system could be printed up into a guide distributed to all national government agents working to regulate the flora trade. Even if national governments determine that orchid collectors are right, that trade restrictions are too tight and orchids should be free to move across borders, a new taxonomy system and the distribution of comprehensive guides for border officials can still help. Introducing foreign species can have devastating effects on local flora and fauna, as we have seen with the introduction of the anaconda to the Florida preserves. Officials who can correctly recognize and record new and foreign species imported into the country will help scientists later on should a plant begin to cause environmental or agricultural issues. Beyond a better taxonomic system, it is difficult to come to a definitive conclusion about the proper overall response to the wild orchid trade. A wide range of factors is

threatening orchids and floristic diversity. Orchid collectors infatuation with the lore of the orchid and its amazing history provides a powerful motivation for the continued hunt for rare orchids. Increasing consumption of natural resources through logging, land conversion, new dams, etc. are all factors in the destruction of orchid habitat. Local culture and eating practices stand in the way of curbing orchid harvesting. These issues are difficult to tackle on their own, let alone to be worked into an international and voluntary agreement like CITES. Even if all of these issues were taken seriously in the international community many ask whether stopping the wild orchid trade is a good use of resources, especially for lesser-developed nations. At a time when borders must be monitored for terrorists, why should states care about a few orchids? In response to this worthwhile question, one needs to look beyond the simple comparison of orchids to terrorists to the larger comparison of environmental health versus terrorism. Orchids are part of a larger ecosystem that feeds populations, provides healthy soil, clean air, and the basis for many essential human products. When taken in this context, orchids become an aspect of the environmental issues increasingly plaguing the planet and its human population. What is needed is a far more multifaceted approach than the ones proffered by those railing against orchid collectors or those staunchly advocating for states sovereign rights over orchids, even if that means orchids will be destroyed in the process of resource extraction. In an ideal world, CITES trade agreement would be more flexible, taking into consideration orchid collectors legitimate concerns about orchid habitat destruction. In some instances, "...“I guess you can argue that alive in the greenhouse is better than extinct in the wild," said Bruce Weissgold, an intelligence specialist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service” (Ferrell 1995, 2). If states are unable or unwilling to

provide the funds for enforcement or properly combat corruption that leads to illegal logging or land appropriation CITES could work to export and propagate rare orchid species in danger of extinction. These efforts would be complimented by the continued efforts of NGOs, IGOs, and governments to halt deforestation and maintain key environments in LDCs.

CITES could and should be complimented by a social campaign to change the way collectors view wild versus cultivated orchids. Just as the term ‘blood diamond’ instigated a massive change in perception of the diamond, so to could a campaign aimed at those harvesting rare flora, and in a bigger context, those states and individuals destroying orchid habitat by logging, farming, or building dams. Realistically, orchids are sexy enough, beautiful enough, and compelling enough to garner the attention of the fickle public and become the face of threatened biodiversity and environmental destruction.

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