

# Communicating biodiversity conservation to traditional and complementary medicine communities

## Opinion

Traditional medicine (TM) has a long history of use in health maintenance and in disease prevention and treatment, particularly for chronic disease. It is the sum total of the knowledge, skill, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness.<sup>1</sup> Across the world, TM is either the mainstay of health care delivery or serves as a complement to it, in which case, it is termed complementary medicine (CM). Traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM),<sup>2</sup> though an important part of health care found in almost every country in the world, with the demand for its services increasing, is often underestimated. T&CM, of proven quality, safety, and efficacy, contributes to the goal of ensuring that all people have access to care. It has been estimated that up to 80% of the world population relies on traditional and complementary medicine to meet their daily health requirements.<sup>1,2</sup> In spite of modern discoveries and elaborate advances in orthodox medicine, several factors are responsible for continued patronage of T&CM across the world. Reliance on T&CM is encouraged by a combination of several factors, depending on geographical location. These include lack of ready access to modern health care facilities; unavailability or insufficiency of trained personnel in orthodox medicine; inadequacy of medical supplies and the overall high cost of conventional medicine which is often out of reach for the common man. In addition, most synthetic drugs are no longer as effective as they used to be due to the dual effects of counterfeit drugs flooding the market and drug resistance by the human system.<sup>3,4</sup> Another factor is side effects of synthetic drugs.<sup>5</sup> Therefore the trend in most parts of the world is the resurgence of interest in T&CM. It is also promoted by the fact that traditional medicine is often seen both as a cultural heritage by peoples all over the world and deemed a more appropriate method of treatment.<sup>5,6</sup> Raw materials for the production of the various medicinal preparations in T&CM are sourced majorly from the wild populations of plants and animals, and mineral deposits. Bioactive constituents found in plants, animal and mineral ingredients alongside ecological / behavioral traits associated with them play a major role in the choice of materials in various medicinal preparations, how they are combined and processed.<sup>4</sup> Many studies all over the world are pointing in the direction that the exploitation of these renewable natural resources for medicinal purposes has no consideration for sustainability. The off take rate is documented to have overtaken recruitment rate for most species of plants and animals. The use of species under various categories of threat of extinction in T&CM has also been documented by several authors. This use in T&CM is in addition to other diverse uses of the renewable resources, exerting additional pressures on them. However, the level of awareness of the whole essence of biodiversity conservation is very low among the practitioners and the consumers of T&CM. According to Commission for Education and Communication, International Union for Conservation of Nature, in a world faced with climate change and biodiversity loss, people

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yearn for messages that change hearts, minds and even behaviors. The conservation community should be embracing strategic communication and new approaches to learning to go beyond jargon.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore essential for the biodiversity conservation community to devise pragmatic means of communicating sustainability to T&CM communities, including gathers/hunters, vendors, practitioners and consumers for them to be involved in the process: to offer helpful inputs, and to plan adequately for restrictions on supply and use.

The messages used to communicate conservation need to be revised and crafted so as to make it comprehensible and acceptable to avoid what has continued to be seen as ideological or culturally imperialistic approaches. If sustainable utilization of natural resources is not adequately and appropriately factored into the practice of traditional and complementary health care delivery, species at regional or even world level will suffer and human health may ultimately become threatened.<sup>8</sup> WHO<sup>1</sup> surmised that interest in T&CM is expanding beyond products to focus on practices and practitioners. If the personnel involved are educated and equipped with requisite information early enough, the need for elaborate monitoring and increased controls might be eliminated through voluntary cooperation and compliance. Indigenous communities that are hosts to the natural "homes" of the resources should also be enrolled, co-opted and integrated as stakeholders in conservation of such resources, with adequate human capacity building and empowerment, to harness and engender their support for, and active participation in such projects.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

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