

New research offers fresh hope to curb illegal orchid trafficking in Vietnam

September 26 2024



Paphiopedilum vietnamense an orchid naturally occurring in Vietnam. Credit: San Diego Zoo, San Diego Zoo Safari Park.

Orchids, with their captivating beauty, have become a multi-billion-dollar industry. Unfortunately, many species are on the brink of

extinction, particularly in Vietnam, due to unsustainable wild harvesting and minimal enforcement of laws restricting it.

Lead author of a [new study](#) in *Biotropica* released Sept. 26, Elizabeth Davis, senior researcher in [community engagement](#) at San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, and her colleagues at Vinh University in Vietnam, were motivated to dig into this issue after colleague and co-author Heinfried Block, senior plant propagator at San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, observed a high volume of orchid trading occurring within a Vietnamese orchid hobbyist and trader Facebook group. Orchids were being offered for sale in bushels, including extremely rare and possibly Critically Endangered species.

"I couldn't believe what I was seeing being sold online, both the species and the volume," said Block. "We knew we needed to dig into this to better understand the trade and determine ways to stop it."

While many studies document the extent of orchid trafficking, the motivations of traffickers are a critical but underexplored aspect of the orchid crisis.

"Without understanding the motivating factors, creating [sustainable solutions](#) is unlikely," said Davis. "Our goal with this study is to shed light on the motivation and knowledge gaps among the collectors who are—often unwittingly—contributing to the problem. What we found provides us with hope that we can turn the tide."

The researchers reveal that many Vietnamese orchid collectors, who sometimes harvest [endangered species](#) in the wild, are largely unaware of [orchids'](#) dire status and the regulations meant to protect them. Alarming, these collectors believe Vietnam still has an abundance of orchids, a misconception that fuels further depletion.

"We found that these collectors and hobbyists have a [high affinity](#) for the conservation of orchids and had no idea that the orchids were in trouble or that harvesting was causing harm. They love orchids and are open to sharing expertise and learning [sustainable practices](#)," said Davis.

"This research is so valuable because it provides directions to change the orchid-consuming behavior of this community," said Trung Tien Cao, professor at Vinh University and co-author of the study. "There is a gap in awareness between what the orchid community believes, and what the reality is for wild orchids, and we provide suggestions for removing that gap."

This new research suggests that by understanding the sociological dimensions driving orchid collectors, targeted awareness campaigns and collaborations can be developed, transforming these collectors from the problem into key conservation allies.

This study offers a roadmap to saving some of the world's most beloved flowers before it's too late. The fate of many orchid species may well depend on this crucial shift in behavior and mindset, and the researchers suggest that orchid collectors in Vietnam are great candidates for such a shift.

Davis and her colleagues are now working on [social media](#) graphics and messaging identified as being likely to change behavior that can be shared on social media within the collector groups, and they have a goal of creating sustainable guidelines for harvesting in the future.

San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance is a designated plant rescue center. In its micropropagation lab, the horticultural department propagates critically endangered *Paphiopedilum* species from Vietnam in vitro. Most recently, the team added seedlings of the Vietnamese *Paphiopedilum delenatii*, *Paphiopedilum malipoense* and *Paphiopedilum*

hangianum—offspring from confiscated plants that were given to San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance for safeguarding.

More information: Elizabeth Oneita Davis et al, Knowledge gaps and opportunities for conservation with orchid collectors in Vietnam, *Biotropica* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/btp.13376](https://doi.org/10.1111/btp.13376)

Provided by San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance

Citation: New research offers fresh hope to curb illegal orchid trafficking in Vietnam (2024, September 26) retrieved 27 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-09-fresh-curb-illegal-orchid-trafficking.html>

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