

NOT A SINGLE ORCHID...

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We all know that the original intent of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species was for the protection of animals. Adding flora was an afterthought that seemed like a good idea at the time. But it has gotten out of hand, and CITES regulation is now deeply entrenched worldwide causing unnecessary expense, heartache and aggravation, not to mention contributing to corruption, smuggling and who knows what else. But I sincerely believe that CITES has not saved one plant from extinction since its inception.

Every thinking person believes in the concept of saving endangered species. We amateur and professional growers, taxonomists and educators, importers and exporters, individuals and organizations, all share a common goal, although the methods for achieving conservation have taken us on radically divergent paths. It is my opinion that CITES regulations, in practice, have proved to be no less than counterproductive to orchid conservation. Certainly, CITES is not the answer. Preventing the trade in animal life is one thing, but CITES was misguided in extending their policy to orchids with Appendix II. Wouldn't it be nice if the CITES authorities would seriously consider the difficulties that the treaty has caused the orchid world? I was once admonished by a famous orchid person to swallow my irritation and testiness, and softly approach the CITES situation with logic and reason, hat in hand as the only way to induce change. Really? I think the only way to get action is to raise holy hell over CITES injustice by confronting them forcefully. Maybe sit-ins won't work, but how about filing an international law suit in the World Court in The Hague?

A few years ago I began a petition that many people agreed with but would not sign. Why? Because CITES has injected fear in the orchid world. Fear of reprisal by CITES officers. Feeling their power, these officers in many instances behave badly by refusing

to issue CITES certificates, or delaying them. Rather than functioning as public servants, some of the administrators behave as martinets. They are hired and paid by CITES in Switzerland and there's no way to change their status short of open revolt. Like Supreme Court judges in the United States, they are in for life. As we all know, Appendix I of CITES lists certain orchids that have been declared "endangered species" to prevent them from being transported across international borders. Each party to the treaty sets up its own system of enforcement. In the United States, the treaty is enforced by the U.S. Department of the Interior/Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. As far as I know, none of the people in these organizations have bothered to study the orchids in the field to determine if they are, in fact, endangered.

For instance, every *Phragmipedium* species is included in Appendix I. Most of those who made, and those who enforce, the treaty have yet to visit the sites in situ. In Ecuador, one can see thousands of *Phragmipedium longifolium* plants growing in a single population. At a streamside location, large stands of many, many hundreds of plants of *Phragmipedium piercii* can be seen growing in clumps. *Phragmipedium besseae* populations range from Ecuador into Peru with plants numbering in the millions. Each of these orchid species grow at many locations. Most of the plants of *Phragmipedium kovachii*, labeled "the most important orchid find in the past 100 years" would still be in their natural habitat in Peru if plants had been exported *legally* to responsible growers for propagation. We know that many mature plants have been distributed worldwide... illegally. Without CITES. *Legal seedlings from flasks will become mature within a very short time.*

In Brazil, *Laelia jongheana* is also "protected" with Appendix I designation, yet they grow by the hun-

dreds of thousands. The only instance I know of where CITES has reversed their regulations is the removal of *Cattleya trianae* from Appendix I. Many forms of this species have always been common in Colombia. It was great that CITES finally figured out it wasn't endangered.

Those familiar with the situation know that the international trade in orchids is a drop in the bucket compared to the loss of *millions upon millions* of orchids, along with their host trees and other plants, as the result of slash-and-burn agriculture. Apparently, this does not concern to CITES. And lip service does not save orchids that actually might be endangered. Based on the fact that there are substantial populations of all *Phragmipedium* species in Central and South America including *kovachii*, I believe that they should remove the species in this genus from Appendix I. Further, placement of *all other* orchids in Appendix II does not seem not realistic or constructive to me, and for those reasons and others, speaking for many people in the orchid world and myself, I feel it is time to kill, or at least modify, many of the restrictions for orchids.

Because orchids must have phytosanitary certification before being shipped or carried across some international borders, the quantity of orchids being shipped can still be checked and controlled at the time of these inspections. I remember the policy practiced in Jamaica prior to the advent of CITES that worked well. Collectors were limited to a maximum of five plants of any one species to be removed from the island. Orchids were checked and released upon completion of a plant health inspection and record of the species being taken.

I began illustrating plants and flowers in the *Oncidium* alliance in 1984. I was fortunate to receive plants from growers and dealers in Mexico and Central and South America and the Caribbean by mail, courier or in person. After completing nearly half the paintings for my book, *The Pictorial Encyclopedia of Oncidium*, along came CITES adding years to the work. That was the bad news. The book actually took thirteen years for me to complete the original edition. The good news is that to legally obtain plant material, I was forced to travel to many countries in Central and South America that I might never have visited.

I was once told by a CITES inspector when carrying a few sterile flasks to New York that charcoal should not be used in the gel medium because he could not see the roots. I could never understand why, in heaven's name, it was necessary for him to examine seedling roots in a sealed bottle? Ridiculous! And hybrids and seed are also now part of the inspection process in many countries.

Here's an idea: Importations, whether by individuals or commercial growers, can meet practical guidelines provided they pass sanitary inspection prior to shipping and an inspection at ports of entry. Yes, USDA inspectors *should* examine orchids and other plants for diseases, insects, and other pests. With such a simplified system of inspection, the nations of the world can expect the cooperation of importers, because no grower, private or commercial, wants to introduce possibly infected plants into their growing environment. Plant inspectors should be encouraged to work *with* responsible growers and scientists. How to change their attitude is a helpless cause.

A more flexible approach by those who have created as well as those who enforce CITES would allow desirable orchids to be imported for future propagation by responsible, certified growers. The subsequent availability of plants reproduced in numbers might then be sold at reasonable cost. Making them available might very well help protect orchids in their natural environment.

Here's where the idiocy of CITES shows its stupidity. A scientist wishing to send dried, pressed specimens of orchids or vouchers of flowers or other plant parts must go through the time and expense of obtaining CITES permits to carry or send material for their work. And a matching CITES at the receiving end must also be issued. To say the least, this is certainly not a productive application of CITES regulations. It hampers research and I think the complete removal of Appendix II restrictions would eliminate these problems. Recently, I prepared twenty small bottles with *Caucaea* vouchers in silica gel that I wanted to send to Mark Chase at Kew for DNA sequencing. I was refused a CITES in Quito. But I can take a bunch of cut flowers across international borders anywhere in the world. Frankly, I think this kind of organized inanity, coupled with abuse of power, needs to be exposed and discussed as often as possible to try to

wake up the CITES organization in hopes that someone there knows a little about orchids. Or is this a lost cause?

At the World Orchid Conference in Dijon a number of potential species exhibitors and vendors had their orchids blocked from entering France. No one is really sure what the reasons were— or if they were legitimate reasons. But it seems mighty strange to me that only the people bringing orchid species were prevented from bringing in their plants by the French CITES and authorities. Brazil, Madagascar, Colombia, the Philippines, Peru and others spent much money for travel and shipping to no avail. The WOC management could not do anything to help.

CITES authorities should change their rulings on flora, orchids especially, to a more practical and sensible approach if they profess to save species (which they probably do not really care about). Orchids, trees, and other plants should be monitored; but it is my opinion that restrictive orchid rulings need to be re-examined and changed. Plants that are being destroyed by habitat destruction should be harvestable, and reasonable quantities of orchids should be allowed in trade. How about up to five of any one species per shipment per year? Removal of orchid species from Appendix II will advance orchid conservation and virtually eliminate the need for smuggling. But common sense and CITES do not seem to be compatible.

Harry Zelenko was born in 1928 in New York City. He was trained as an artist at the High School of Music & Art followed by the Art Student's League and courses in art at New York University. At the age of nineteen he became art director of the largest advertising agency in Connecticut. Zelenko Associates, a creative design group, was founded in 1953. His work has received many professional awards and he has lectured and exhibited internationally. In New York, he built orchid greenhouses on the roof and terrace of his brownstone where he grew about three thousand orchids. In 1984 he began producing paintings for a book on orchids, and as Z A I Publications, published the first edition of *The Pictorial Encyclopedia of Oncidium* in 1997 with more than 850 paintings of plants and flowers. The second, revised edition followed seven years later. He moved to Ecuador and built two greenhouses to house a tripled collection of orchids. He is currently a member of the Greater New York Orchid Society and the Quito Orchid Society.