The market for medicinal herbs in the United States is worth over $3 billion and is growing at a rate of about 20 percent per year (Nutrition Business Journal 1998). At least 175 species of plants native to North America are offered for sale in the non-prescription medicinal market in the United States. More than 140 medicinal herbs native to North America have been documented in herbal products and phytomedicines in foreign countries, and dozens and possibly hundreds of these are collected in large quantities from the wild in the United States (Robbins 1999).
Recognizing that commercial demands may pose threats to native plants in the United States, representatives from industry, government, academia, tribes, and environmental organizations joined together to form the Medicinal Plant Working Group (PCA-MPWG) under the umbrella of the Plant Conservation Alliance (PCA). The PCA is a consortium of 10 Federal agency members and over 145 non-Federal cooperators representing various disciplines in the field of plant conservation. The PCA serves as the North American Plant Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission.

The PCA-MPWG’s primary focus is to facilitate action on behalf of medicinal plants native to the United States that are of particular conservation concern in order to balance biological and commercial needs and, in the long term, minimize regulatory intervention. To this end, the objectives of the group include:

- generating and sharing information regarding species of medicinal and economic importance and conservation concern;
- promoting appropriate conservation measures for native medicinal plants;
- promoting sustainable production of native medicinal plants;
- increasing participation in native medicinal plant conservation;
- encouraging active participation by tribes and other holders of traditional ecological knowledge pertaining to native medicinal plants; and
- generating financial support for native medicinal plant projects.


Since its inception in June 1999, membership in the PCA-MPWG has grown to over 179 individuals from at least 39 States and tribes and eight foreign countries. Participants have established committees to address each of the six main areas of emphasis identified above. Committee Chairs include representatives from Paracelsian (a biotech company), the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Botanic Gardens, the University of Maryland, Wilcox Natural Products, Ticonderoga Farms, and TRAFFIC North America. A “core group” of members, including the Committee Chairs and interested others, meets regularly by conference call to discuss progress. The PCA-MPWG is completing its strategic plan and each committee is beginning to take steps to achieve its objectives. For example, the Conservation Committee is selecting specific “species of concern” for each region of the country and will plan appropriate conservation measures. The Participation Committee is developing a list of things the public can do to help conserve medicinal plants, such as to buy products derived from cultivated sources. The entire PCA-MPWG shares information and keeps in touch on significant issues via a listserver.

Julie Lyke is the PCA-MPWG Chair. If you would like to participate in this effort, contact her at: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Scientific Authority, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Arlington, Va 22203; 703/358-1708; julie_lyke@fws.gov. For further information, visit the PCA-MPWG web site at http://www.nps.gov/plants/medicinal.

References

Ginseng (Panax quinquefolius) is one of the world’s top selling medicinal herbs. About 125 million plants were taken from the wild in the U.S. for export to Southeast Asia in 1996.

Opposite page, top: In recent years, wild ginseng roots have sold for over $500 per pound. The oldest roots are the ones most highly prized and can be several decades old.

Opposite page, bottom: Poaching of ginseng and other medicinal plants is such a problem that high-tech systems have been developed to track plants stolen from public lands.

Corel Corp. photo