

## THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’

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I haven’t been in this field for as long as some others so I wouldn’t classify myself as a “Dinosaur” (though “Megafauna” comes to mind) but still I have been growing carnivorous plants since 1985. During those years I have seen our hobby/business/research field change and not always for the good. More to the point, basically good ideas and developments resulted to some extent in negative developments. I think this is something that should be called out and put up for discussion, so allow me to take you on a walk down memory lane.

In the 1970s carnivorous plants were readily available in shops all over The Netherlands. Large specimens of *Darlingtonia californica* could be found in even run of the mill flower shops. Given the relatively low price, the size of the plants and lots of “imperfections” (signs that a bug has been eating some part of the plant, etc.) it was obvious that most if not all were taken from the wild and imported. Pitchers of *Sarracenia* were also common as “cut flower” in arrangements and many of those also probably came from the wild.

There simply were hardly any nurseries around and none of those that existed would have been able to spend the time on growing a plant that big and/or in those numbers for the going rates. This was not that strange in those days. People had a different view on conservation and rules worth mentioning were hardly in place in most countries, let alone on an international scale.

However, this was going to change.

First of all, let us do a reality check. Every plant or animal in a botanical garden, zoological facility, or even your windowsill can trace its ancestry back to a collection from the wild. In itself there was initially nothing thought to be wrong with that. Had those collections not taken place we would also have missed out on many lifesaving medications and for that matter a whole lot of other things we use every day.

Wild collection has also been happening for a very long time. The first farmers started selecting wild grasses to become our wheat and barley some 13000 years ago! However, the late 1960s and early 1970s were a time for different things and a taste for the exotic. From Indian restaurants bringing us exotic foods, to exotic houseplants. This came with the realization that a lot of money could be made catering to exotic (plant) tastes. Especially in the orchid and exotic pet trade business was booming. As the demand grew, we reached a point that we started to realize that something had changed. We took more from the environment than we needed and we didn’t bother to cultivate and reproduce what we took as we just went for more. Also, in the collection process as much, if not more, was destroyed than was actually taken.

As a counter reaction to this, 1975 saw the birth of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, better known as CITES.

Here we have the first perfect example from well-meant intentions also having an adverse effect. CITES was created to regulate the trade in wild, and especially rare, species. The idea was that by regulating the trade it would be easier to protect wild populations and prevent illegally collected material from reaching the marketplace.

That was not an undivided success. Yes, the trade was regulated and that had some effect, but the regulations were complicated and bureaucratic. Furthermore, CITES was mostly written with an eye for the protection of animals. But CITES also applied the same rules to plant protection,

which made much less sense the way the rules were written. What CITES thus also accomplished was to create serious obstacles for those who tried to follow the rules. By demanding huge amounts of paperwork and proof of provenance, the price of legal material got pushed up, making a “slight bending of the rules” very lucrative for those with a less well-developed sense of honesty. To put it bluntly, a side effect of the birth of CITES was to partly fuel the illegal trade because following the rules became such a pain in the behinds that turning to “the dark side”, or at least several (50?) shades of grey, was suddenly much more appealing.

So, where does that leave us young Skywalker?

Well, in the 1980s our beloved carnivorous plants, that in the 1970s were just part of the broad range of exotic plants, started to become fashionable, as shown by the fact that many of the older carnivorous plant societies were founded in the mid 1980s.

This produced two notable effects.

First of all, with the spread of information the demand for rare species and all things new grew fast. People saw these new plants on shows winning prizes and in newsletters people were showing their collections.

Human nature—being to want what it can afford (and sometimes more) and wanting things no one else has—meant that we saw a spike in the demand for these plants. You guessed it, score for the illegal trade.

On the other hand, people meeting in societies and at shows also saw amateurs selling and trading their surplus plants. That had, to some extent, a stabilizing effect on the trade. But for really rare stuff, CITES made trading between amateur growers, at least legally, in different countries very expensive in time and money (thank Darwin that the EU is one CITES-zone).

The increased interest in carnivorous plants gave also rise to a great hunger for information. The average grower generally lacked access to scientific publications and books were limited and often in a foreign language. Affordable books catering to novice growers were hard to find, until the publication of *The Savage Garden* (D’Amato 1998).

As the number of CP clubs grew useful information became available from experienced growers and newsletters.

The big bang for information however came with the rise of personal computers. Specifically, as early as the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1990, the Carnivorous Plant listserv was launched (Brittnacher 2002) and shared information by using bulk e-mail to the subscribers. At that same time, the World Wide Web was developed by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989 at CERN, originally conceived and developed to meet the demand for automated information-sharing between scientists in universities and institutes around the world. In 1993, software was put in the public domain allowing the spread of modern websites, including the carnivorous plant world. The ICPS-website ([www.carnivorousplants.org](http://www.carnivorousplants.org)) went online about April 1999 (J. Brittnacher, pers. comm.).

In 1993, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was created to be the international legal instrument for “the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources”. This convention was created with well-meant intention and specifically to legally arrange ownership of biodiversity. The famous article 15 states: “Recognizing the sovereign rights of States over their natural resources, the authority to determine access to genetic resources rests with the national governments and is subject to national legislation” and that “Access, where granted, shall be on mutually agreed terms” and “subject to prior informed consent of the Contracting Party providing such resources, unless otherwise determined by that Party.” Basically, this was meant to, e.g., prevent medical companies from stripping a forest of its plants to see if they can find a cure for some

disease that will make them millions without paying the country of origin of the plant, let alone the traditional owners of that forest.

Again, although the intention is noble, it had two side effects that are not as desirable.

The first effect is creating a scientific and potential health problem when countries deny scientists and companies access to the plants without doing anything with them themselves. You can say that is well within their rights, but somehow it doesn't feel good knowing a possible cure for say AIDS is growing on some tree in a place that doesn't allow scientist to collect and analyze it.

The second is more troublesome from a conservation perspective. CITES regulated trade and created several hurdles for dealers, but the CBD resulted in much stricter rules in needing to prove that the original material was legally collected. I doubt if any nursery or hobbyist can really prove the legality of all of their plants to the point of origin.

Is that a problem? Well technically it is, but in general you are ok when the plant has been known to be in cultivation for years. The main issues are with new species and new locations.

And that brings us at the next step in our story.

In the late 1990s, it started to become much easier to visit exotic locations. Flights were more affordable and the concept of travelling without a group and no longer on a fixed tourist track became more common. Several parties actually started to cater to that, from local guides to companies that, especially since the 2010s, offer specific nature-based trips to the interested parties. Most of those guides and companies are perfectly legitimate and are actual nature lovers who managed to earn a living with their passion. Good for them! However, there are bad apples and even the honest ones open the way for poachers. It only takes one talkative porter to leak the news that something special was found.

With trips and even target species published online to get customers and with many people posting their finds delightedly on Facebook, Twitter, and personal blogs it is not difficult to find rare plants. The date and location of the trip is known and it only takes a halfway decent tracker to follow the tracks of such trips the next day as most of these trips with porters and all are small expeditions. They leave a track like a herd of elephants so to speak.

Not only do those trips, organized or private, inadvertently get the attention of poachers but every now and then they even find and describe new species. All of this contributes to the demand for plants, some of them so recently found that the first poached specimens are already on their way to greenhouses in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere before the species is even properly named. This helps to create a demand that, due to paperwork and procedures couldn't be satisfied by commercial nurseries in a legal way. This is what the unscrupulous buyer wants. The number of obviously poached specimens on offer is staggering as are the prices that get paid. The 1995 birth of eBay created the perfect tool for these transactions, though other media have their share of the trafficked traffic.

The final development takes us to the present day.

Today we see a lot of people making reasonable wages – perhaps in some cases, too much money.

With consumers willing to pay too much money for plants, it also became very lucrative to start a business.

Previously, the number of nurseries were limited and everybody knew the people running them. The store-owners belonged within the carnivorous plant community because, besides earning a living, they actually had a genuine love for the plants.

This is sadly not always the case with the more recent nurseries. Yes, many are thoroughly decent, often former hobbyists that made their hobby their world – many are even good friends of

mine. But there are people who are just in it for the money. And here we have the pro and con of the latest decade. While there are more nurseries that are able to meet cultivation demands, the ethos of harsh business is popping up its head. Not that long ago business competition was being held in a decent way, with people actually helping each other out as there was a slice of bread for everyone to be had. But now I have noticed competitors actually going a long way to put the competition in a bad light, conversations are rude and are posted on the internet or social media for everyone to see. There is simply too much money to be had for some people to stay sociable, it seems.

I, and I hope you, will find this a sad and unwanted development and my hope for the next decade would be that we can shun these undesirable sellers into extinction and start afresh.

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