

# Nature, Market, Traffic, Ethics and Utopia ?

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All the debate on this serious problem of prohibition leading to illegal trafficking is worthwhile, for it shows clearly that we are going the wrong way about things and that the only real way to protect endangered species is through their mass propagation. Surely it will be people who steal plants in habitat, to produce seeds in (Central) Europe or Japan who will reduce the high prices asked for plants and relieve the pressure of illegal traffic.

Nevertheless, it hurts me to say that this practice has to be illegal. In the case of *Mammillaria luethyi*, that everybody can now easily acquire, not from habitat, but from the propagation of a wild clone reproduced by grafting. It is officially "illegal", but sincerely, in this instance, where is the danger for the plants in their habitat?

At this moment, the cost for only one seed of *Astrophytum (Digitostigma) medusae* is astronomically inflated. I believe that there are many hidden interests that will not come to light. I wanted to distribute the seeds like I did for *Aztekium hintonii* and *Geohintonia mexicana*, not for economic benefit (All the seeds I bought were sent **free of charge**). Obviously if 100 seeds only are legally destined for Europe, the price goes up and now **\$100US is requested for each one** ! People are crazy to buy seeds at this price but the thing is that the legal cost is more than 90 Euros and another factor is that the first illegal seeds that will arrive soon in Europe will be distributed illegally at 5 Euros per seed.

As a result, I believe that these factors clearly stimulate the search for this plant in an illegal way and will motivate illegal trade, perhaps resulting in over collecting when the exact place where it grows is made known. I would have been very happy to be able to acquire the seeds at a more normal price and seeds could then be distributed freely between those who can make the plants grow quickly and create more plants by mass propagation thus avoiding that great sacking that will surely take place shortly. Is it necessary to repeat that the desire to obtain a new species for a collector is not a sin nor an offence, it is just a normal wish to find on the market what is new, we just have to find the best way to comply by means of propagation. CITES is made for controlling **trade in wild species**, but especially in plants, they also prohibit the trade of artificially produced plant (I still have at the nursery thousands of *Aloe rauhii*, *descoingsii* all artificially propagated, that I cannot sell to America or out of the EEC because they are (still) included in the CITES I list. Why those involved in the erection of CITES do not come to see the work of many nurserymen I do not understand? Why are they so suspicious? Because they just allow the development of illegal trade and they do not know how to stop it. We know very well as we are involved in this, everyday.

There is also the case of *Aloe porphyrostachys* that I discovered in 1985 in Jordan and the fact that I just removed two clones from habitat. I was able to produce seed and distribute plants, before the official description of the species in 2000 in the *US Cactus*

& *Succulent Journal*. The plant is already in cultivation, so there is no danger of overcollecting for this species. Only two clones were necessary for propagation...

*Mammillaria luethyi* is another great example of this. From two "illegal" plants coming from different locations in Ciudad Acuña, by grafting, a single nurseryman was able to produce thousands of units that are distributed to everybody requiring a plant, grafted, or on its own roots. These specimens are of excellent quality and are sold at a very economic price. Therefore it is unthinkable that in an article published about the original *Digitostigma*, it is said that its location is secret and that there is a risk in the loss of wild populations. Today the policy is not to tell where the exact location is, and some botanists even give false data (personal communication on Monaco congress, last June) which is in my opinion completely silly: it is better to write nothing than to disclose false locations! Anyway, sooner or later, the first to discover the habitat become the traffickers. I believe that a real chasm exists between Mexico and Europe. I am in corresponding now with Mexican investigators who are working on new and very interesting *Ariocarpus* species. In the next months, or years we will see many sensational surprises in this genus. But will we see these plants soon on the European market ?

Also I have been able to see photos of the newly discovered Mammillarias. These already are in Germany and only 4 units of each new species have been collected to propagate them, not hundreds or thousands as the true trafficker would take. It is necessary to emphasise such a difference between the exploitive robber of wild habitat plants and those who collect to conserve and preserve. It is obviously clear that everybody that wants new species cannot go to the habitat to look for them and bring 3-4 unit of each, because the cumulative effect would be devastating and it would destroy the wild populations. Nevertheless, I am in favour of institutions controlling the trade, and the first legal units could be offered quickly. Surely a future Utopia is possible...

It should be emphasised that (*Astrophytum*) *Digitostigma caput-medusae* is easily and quickly propagated from seed and still more by grafting. Already there are people prepared to try as they are adept with all the techniques necessary for rapid propagation so the plants could be found for sale in many nurseries as grafted plants in the course of the first months and at an acceptable price. We can hope to buy the plant when the prices are lower, but with that incredibly high price of \$100US per seed, we obviously are sure that this will stimulate the illegal trade and exploitation of the few wild plants that still today live in habitat.

Text : J.L. & J.L.

We still receive letters and e-mails from botanists, collectors, nurserymen, writers, all well-known, from UK, USA, Italy, France, Germany, even Mexico, who completely agree with our opinion and to the changes we propose. But the fact they wish to remain anonymous, shows how high the pressure is. The time to prohibit *Lophophora williamsii* because it may become a drug is no more acceptable than the outlawing of the right to grow and propagate freely any threatened species.