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Richness and diversity of alien ethnomedicinal plant taxa used and sold for traditional medicine in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, indigenous plant species are used and traded for traditional medicine (*muthi*) and so are alien plant species. A literature review of 40 previous studies and survey work at various outlets, including *muthi* markets and *muthi* shops in Johannesburg, Durban and Pretoria, found that 320 alien plant species are used and/or sold for traditional medicine in South Africa. Fifty three of the 320 species were found to have weed and/or invader status. Surveys at Faraday and Warwick *muthi* markets in Johannesburg and Durban respectively as well as *muthi* shops in Johannesburg, Durban and Pretoria were conducted from October 2010 to February 2011. The following aspects regarding the plant material traded were recorded: the differences in the number of volumes traded; the differences in the number of alien species sold in the markets and shops (and also in Indian and Black-owned shops); the source and origins of these and the viability of propagules sold in the *muthi* trade. The surveys found that 49 alien plant species were sold and approximately 87 x 50kg-size bags of alien plant material was present in the markets and shops during the time of the survey. *Muthi* shops sold more than double the number of alien plant species than were sold in the markets and the same result was found for Indian versus Black-owned shops. Alien species were either harvested in South Africa, predominantly in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), or imported from India. Indian-owned *muthi* shops sold more species imported from India than alien species that were naturalised and harvested in South Africa. In contrast, the majority of alien species sold at markets and Black-owned shops were harvested in KZN. Viability tests found that 24% of alien plant species sold in this study had greater than 50% viability. Six invasive species are traded in low volumes with viable propagules sold for five of these, highlighting a possibility of spreading through the traditional medicine trade. The study concluded that the total trade in alien plant species is trivial in comparison to the trade of indigenous plant species.