UNEP-MANAGED CITES DATABASE REVEALS RED SANDERS SMUGGLING

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"Red Sanders is under severe pressure from illegal logging and harvesting." File image for representation. | Photo Credit: C. Venkatachalapathy

The CITES trade database has recorded 28 incidents of Red Sanders confiscation, seizure, and specimen from the wild being exported from India, a factsheet prepared by TRAFFIC, a global wildlife trade monitoring organisation has revealed. CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between governments, whose aim is to ensure that international trade in specimen of wild animals and plants, does not threaten the survival of the species.

"These consignments were exported to China (53.5%), Hong Kong (25.0%), Singapore (17.8%) and the United States of America (3.5%) from 2016 to 2020," the factsheet said. Red Sanders *Pterocarpus santalinus*, or red sandalwood, is an endemic tree species with distribution restricted to the Eastern Ghats of India. The species found in Andhra Pradesh and growing up to a height of 10 to 15 metres, is reported to be one of India's most exploited tree species, and is under severe pressure from illegal logging and harvesting. Under the foreign trade policy of India, the import of Red Sanders is prohibited, while export is restricted.

"India reported an export of more than 19,049 tonnes of logs. In comparison, the importing countries reported about 4,610 tonnes of logs, 127 tonnes of sawn wood, 20 tonnes of transformed wood and 980 kg of wood products, clearly indicating a discrepancy in reporting of Red Sander trade," the factsheet said.

According to the recently released communiqué titled "RED SANDERS: Factsheet on India's Red Sanders in illegal wildlife trade", China remains the largest importer with more than 13,618 tonnes of the products, followed by Hong Kong (5,215 tonnes) and Singapore (216 tonnes).

"Red Sanders is under severe pressure from illegal logging and harvesting. Its heartwood is in demand in both domestic and international markets and is used to make furniture and handicrafts, while the red dye obtained from the wood is used as a colouring agent in textiles and medicines. Rampant illegal logging has been reported across its range State," said Merwyn Fernandes, coordinator of TRAFFIC's India office.

Listed under Schedule IV of The Wildlife Protection Act and Endangered as per IUCN Red List,

Red Sanders is a very slow-growing tree species that attains maturity in natural forests after 25-40 years.

The document also highlighted the conservation efforts of the species and pointed out that in 2016 the Andhra Pradesh Forest Act, was amended via A.P. Act No.15 of 2016, to give special status of protection to Red Sanders. Red Sanders offences were made cognisable and non-bailable, and the punishments related to it were enhanced.

The publication called declaring the Red Sanders harbouring forests within the species' geographical range as 'High Conservation Areas', to provide an adequate legal framework for protecting the species and its habitat. "Enforcement agencies such as the Forest Departments, Customs, Railways, Police, DRI (Directorate of Revenue Intelligence), and Coast Guards must coordinate efforts to curb the Red Sanders trafficking by sharing information on hotspots and transit routes and real-time intelligence related to the Red Sanders smuggling," the factsheet pointed out.

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