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Sustaining wild species is critical

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Page no: 7



NATURE'S FOOD ... Mopane worms at a market in South Africa. Photo: George Sekonya



THE Covid-19 pandemic has led to a worldwide crisis of food insecurity and unemployment. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) warns of rising hunger and poverty.

Commentators, particularly from the global North, have raised concerns about the implications for biodiversity. The first is that in some places, budgets for biodiversity conservation have been reduced due to a drastic drop in tourism revenue and the diversion of funds and forces to health-related functions. Secondly, growing poverty and the loss of livelihoods may drive people to poaching.

Others are concerned there will be increased habitat loss due to forest clearance for fuel wood and subsistence agriculture. There have been widespread calls for the banning of wet markets and the use of bushmeat.

The global conservation community has correctly pointed to humankind's destruction of biodiversity and ecosystems as a cause of the pandemic.

We argue for a more nuanced approach. The use of wild species is not a new or unusual livelihood strategy, nor is it necessarily detrimental to conservation. Over one billion people across the world rely on such resources for food, medicine, fuel and building materials.

The uses of and trade in wild species include much more than fuel wood and illegal wildlife.

Our view is that the sustainable use of wild species needs to be recognised as a critical coping and resilience strategy.

Among other things, it provides people with access to food, fuel, income and medicine in circumstances where these are unavailable or unaffordable in the mainstream economy.

Recognising the value of wild species will both support rural livelihoods and provide important incentives for its sustainable use.

WHAT WE KNOW

Over 6% of rural households in South Africa trade in at least one wild resource, spanning fuel wood, medicinal plants, weaving fibres, wild foods, grass and twig brushes, and crafts. The income from such trade equates to about N\$5 612 per rural household per year.

The use of biodiversity is also a critical buffer against economic shocks, disease and climate change. During the Sudanese war, for example, communities used and sold wild fruit as a coping strategy.

In five southern African countries, over a third of surveyed households resorted to trading in wild foods, wood and medicinal products because they lost their primary earning member to disease.

In Zimbabwe, baobab use and trade soared in line with the collapse of the economy.

The fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic is expected to increase people's reliance on wild resources as a safety net.

This will be particularly true for informal workers, who comprise three fifths of the global workforce.

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