CHAPTER 3

CULTIVATION OF MEDICINAL PLANTS AS A TOOL FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN THE AMATOLA REGION, SOUTH AFRICA

K.F. WIERSUM[*], A.P. DOLD[**,***], M. HUSSELMAN[**] AND M. COCKS[**]

[*] *Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group, Wageningen University, The Netherlands*
[**] *Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, South Africa*
[***] *Selmar Schonland Herbarium, Rhodes University, South Africa*

Abstract. This paper describes the assumptions and results of a study to assess whether cultivation of medicinal plants can serve as a tool for combining biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. The study was carried out in the Amatola region, Eastern Cape, South Africa, where increased market's interest in medicinal plant use, also under non-traditional conditions, has resulted in an increase in commercial demands. It was based on the assumption of poverty alleviation not only referring to an increase in income and labour, but also an increase in social capital and human dignity. The study assessed the local perceptions of the use and cultivation of medicinal plants and the need for conservation of these plants, as well as the features of already ongoing cultivation practices and options for increased cultivation. It consisted of participatory appraisals in three villages involving around 250 persons and participatory trials with 14 rural women selling medicinal plants on urban markets. The study indicated that the growing demand for medicinal plants is related to the great cultural significance attached to medicinal plants. The growing demand has not only resulted in increased hazard for overexploitation of wild plant populations, but also increased interest in cultivation. Several factors need attention in linking of biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation: (a) selection of specific target groups and the identification of the links between cultivation practices and livelihood conditions, (b) role of cultural factors in medicinal plant use and cultivation, and (c) cultivation by local people being not primarily based on local awareness of the loss of wild species, but on local perceptions about financially lucrative medicinal plants. It is concluded that the scope for cultivation of medicinal plants for combined biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation should not be considered light-heartedly. However, the impact can be positive in case cultivation is considered within the context of protecting and strengthening the cultural values of biodiversity and creating a positive attitude towards biodiversity conservation in general.

Keywords: cultural values, financial values, medicinal-plant traders, participatory technology development

R.J. Bogers, L.E. Craker and D. Lange (eds), Medicinal and Aromatic Plants, 43-55.