

CITES, Orchid Judging and Endangered Species

By Paul Alan Wetter, MD

This is an important time to think about the judges' role in protecting endangered species. And whether or not we would apply special rules for these plants.

There is much debate about the role of AOS judges in judging protected endangered species and compliance with CITES (Convention On International Trade In Endangered Species Of Wild Fauna and Flora).

I think the answer is a simple one. AOS judges should discourage violation of CITES. We should clearly state our objection to removal of protected species from their natural habitat. However, we should not inhibit the judging or awarding of these species or their progeny by imposing special requirements or notations. And we should not impose any special rules for these species or their progeny.

There are several dilemmas about CITES orchid species that lead to the above conclusions.

1. Some species have been confiscated by legitimate authorities and placed in nurseries for possible propagation and distribution. This practice will most likely continue. Authorities have recognized the importance of preservation and propagation outside natural habitats.
2. Genetic materials from some species have been used prior to CITES and will show up on judging tables.
3. Materials from some countries that do not comply with CITES will be used in hybridizing and it's likely those hybrids will be seen at judging centers.

CITES BACKGROUND The Convention On International Trade In Endangered Species Of Wild Fauna and Flora is an international agreement between governments. Its goal is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild plants and animals does not threaten their survival.¹

CITES is a draft based on a resolution adopted in 1963 at the meeting of members of the World Conservation Union² text of the convention. In July 1975, CITES entered into force, with 80 countries approving and joining the convention.

AOS AND CITES The American Orchid Society publishes guidelines for the importation of orchids that comply and outline procedures of CITES and compliance with US Government Agencies that enforce and control CITES (USDA/USDI/APHIS/PPQ/USDI/USFWS).³ In addition to these agencies, there are numerous agencies in the 80 countries that comply with CITES. Their job is to make sure the rules are followed.

Basically, the import, export or re-export of orchid species listed in the CITES Appendices (or any part or derivative of such plant) requires a permit.⁴

AOS JUDGING AND SPECIES CONSERVATION From its origin, orchid commerce and hobby involved removal of plants from their natural habitats. *Cattleya labiata*, the mother of all cattleyas, was collected from the jungle in 1818, and was not found again for 71 years, because of possible deforestation for early plantations in Brazil.⁵ This story has unfortunately been repeated many times with other species.

You could make a strong argument for the following. If no species or genetic material from species were removed from their natural habitat, there would not be any AOS or judging system. On the other hand, many of the species that are present today would have been lost forever if they were not collected, because of the subsequent destruction of natural habitat. This destruction still continues. Rainforests are being lost at the rate of 2.4 acres (1 ha) per second.⁶

Orchid hobbyists have recognized the importance of orchid species. The percentage of species propagated and perpetuated in orchid collections has increased significantly over the past 50 years. There are now a number of active orchid organizations dedicated exclusively to species.

The AOS judging system recognizes species and awards and records flower uniqueness and growth habit. The AOS mission includes: “Support the preservation and perpetuation of orchid species,” “Extend the knowledge, production, use and appreciation of orchids,” “Collect and disseminate information” and “Support education and research,” among other worthy goals.⁷ By education and information, we can all learn more about the importance of conservation and preservation. This information more than any other helps spread the word about the variety of orchid species.

Recording of award information also helps those tracking CITES species to follow the propagation and distribution of “legal” species.

AOS should continue to follow the same good course it has in the past: providing CITES information and of judging, awarding and recording uniqueness.

Fortunately, almost all plant hybridizers are decent honest citizens. In any field there is the occasional lawbreaker. Permit checking and associated record keeping should be the purview of the legal system and the myriad agencies involved in protection and orchid judging should be the purview of the orchid societies, including AOS.

In this way we will not discourage legal owners of species from displaying, hybridizing and participating in AOS judging by requiring more paperwork and documentation and special note keeping by AOS judges.

We will continue to encourage education and understanding of the diversity of orchid genera and species as well as their hybrids and continue to help protect natural environments and perpetuate important genetic material from extinction. I believe that this course will best serve a goal of species preservation and diminished natural habitat destruction. This route will promote continuation of the good work we all do as volunteers in the AOS judging program.

Footnotes

1 Text of The Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Washington, DC, March 3, 1973

2 World Conservation Union — The World Conservation Union is the world’s largest and most important conservation network. The Union brings together 82 States, 111 government agencies, more than 800 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and some 10,000 scientists and experts from 181 countries in a unique worldwide partnership.

The Union’s mission is to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable.

The World Conservation Union is a multicultural, multilingual organization with 1000 staff located in 62 countries. Its headquarters is in Gland, Switzerland.

3 Importing Orchids: AOS Web site <http://aos.org/aos/uploadedfiles/docs/cultureimporting.pdf>

4 <http://www.cites.org/eng/resources/species.html>. To search for specific orchid species refer to <http://www.cites.org/eng/resources/species.html>

5 Various historical references.

6 http://www.ran.org/info_center/factsheets/04b.html.

7 Mission Statement of the American Orchid Society.

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