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## Waiting for the salep storm: what future for the protected orchids of Greece?

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Salep, the flour made by grinding orchid tubers into a powder, is widely used in the eastern Mediterranean area, mainly for the production of the homonymous beverage, but also as an additive in other products, such as “dondurma” ice cream. In Greece, salep is more common in the northern parts of the country, a cultural remnant of the Ottoman period. Despite the protection of Orchidaceae under Greek and international law, the demand for salep continues to drive the illegal collection of orchids in Greece. Salep is part of an emerging mass market in “traditional” or “wild” products that targets, as well as orchids, medicinal plants, aromatic herbs and edible mushrooms. Thus, the trade in salep is likely to grow, and it has been referred to as a significant threat for several orchid species in the region. Our study focuses on the current status of the orchid species that are collected for salep in north-western Greece, mainly *Dactylorhiza sambucina* (L.) Soó and *Orchis mascula* (L.) L., and possible future impacts of salep harvesting. Our research methodology includes ethnographic tools, mainly interviews with key stakeholders including collectors, as well as field sampling and population analysis. Our preliminary results indicate that the impact of traditional collection methods has been rather limited and minor. However, given the growing mass market in salep, ongoing climatic changes, and our insufficient knowledge of the orchid population dynamics, predicting future developments in population vulnerability is difficult. We discuss how similar studies can help improve conservation guidelines on the effect of collection on wild populations, as there is clearly an urgent need to find sustainable management solutions for species of commercial interest.

**Key words:** illegal trade, orchids, salep, northern Greece, orchid conservation