

## “OPERATION MARCO POLO”: AN ITALIAN INVESTIGATION ON THE ILLEGAL TRADE IN ASIAN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

This document has been submitted by Italy.

### Background

The Conference of the Parties has adopted several Resolutions on Asian traditional medicine recommending stricter measures to stop the illegal trade and consumption of TCM products. In particular, Resolution Conf. 9.6 recommended to the Parties to make sure their national legislation can effectively control trade in all parts and derivatives of CITES-listed species used for medicinal products containing or said to contain them. This was further emphasized by Resolution Conf 10.19 which requested Parties to closely work with traditional Asian medicine practitioners and consumers to increase the awareness on the illegal use of endangered wildlife species. This Resolution also recommends the strengthening and enforcement of legislation, the promotion of new techniques in the identification of parts and derivatives used in TCM and the investigation on potential substitute ingredients. During the 11th meeting of the Conference of the Parties, Document 11.56 provided an update on the recommendations made to the Parties in Resolution Conf. 10.19.

Since the early 1990s there have been regular seizures of medicines and raw ingredients in Europe. Among these it is worth mentioning a case in Belgium in 2000, with over 6000 tiger and musk plasters seized; those of the Netherlands between 1999 and 2000, with over 7460 traditional medicine items seized and a case in the UK in 1999 where the HM Customs and Excise seized about 400 kg of traditional Asian medicines, including tiger bone plasters, pills containing leopard, rhinoceros and American ginseng.

In this context some countries developed and improved the control system on wildlife trade and medical products at a national and international level, leading, in Italy, to the “Operation MARCO POLO “.

According to information collected in Italy during the last years by Italian State's Forest Corps (Corpo Forestale dello Stato-CFS), the National CITES enforcement authority, there has been an increase of Chinese communities in big cities such as Milan, Florence, Rome and Naples, with a consequent spreading of oriental traditions and culture. The CFS, also with the co-operation of the Italian office of TRAFFIC Europe, has carried out an investigation on the use of TCM in Italy, discovering an increasing market of medicines containing parts and derivatives of endangered wildlife species. Starting from data collected at a national and international, level more information was gathered on the diffusion of TCM. The first evaluation showed that the Chinese and Asian communities in Italy are significantly consuming these products even when they are illegally imported.



## The Operation MARCO POLO

Since 2002 to July 2004 the Italian State's Forest Corps-CFS, in co-operation with the Dutch Authorities, through the INTERPOL- Wildlife Crime Group, started a throughout investigation on trade, use and utilization of Asian medicine products at national level using also Custom intelligence to ascertain medicines and raw materials that could have entered the country evading import controls.

The investigation led, in August 2004, to the so-called "OPERATION MARCO POLO", a joint police action managed simultaneously in different Italian cities that allowed the verification and seizure of huge quantities of medicinal products illegally imported, traded and used. Thanks to Marco Polo operation thousands of medicines packages (containing parts and derivatives of several CITES-listed animal and plant species, such as musk deer, rhinoceros, leopards and orchids), but also raw material of animal and plant species, were finally seized.

Shops and herbs shops were raided in Rome and hinterland, Prato, Bologna, Reggio Emilia and Milano by specialised personnel of CFS. Nearly 9,000 products were seized representing an impressive array of medicine products said to contain several endangered species of fauna and flora. Moreover the Italian CFS discovered also important quantities of animal parts such as saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*) horns and pangolin (*Manis spp*) scales. Also many plants were confiscated such as roots of Asian ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) or dried plants (*Saussurea costui*, *Cibotium baronetz*). Additional information were also found on the INTERNET, where TCM illegal products were offered on sale by the involved firms.



Several foreign nationals were denounced to the Judiciary Authority as well as an important Italian trader. The trial will be held very soon.



All the main national TV and radio broadcasters, as well as the relevant newspapers and magazine reported the "Marco polo" case.

The activity promoted by the CITES Italian Authorities (Ministry of Environment and Land Protection and Italian State's Forest Corps) will continue, with the aim to develop a national guide/manual in Italian and a Database for all the operators and investigators involved in this particular field.