

of taxa and recommend conservation actions sufficient to ensure long-term survival of these species. Action Planning is the best means for the MPSG to play its role as advisory and catalytic committee for other bodies. As a first step, it is proposed to draw up national reports which review existing information on medicinal plants in local, regional and international trade and short-list species for special attention.

Call for contributions. To achieve our goal of global coordination of activities in medicinal plant conservation, this newsletter will also serve as a forum to present regional groups and networks, their ongoing projects and achievements such as conferences, meetings, publications, project reports and newsletters. We would like to encourage all members and readers to use this newsletter as a platform to make your work more widely known. Contributions are highly appreciated and should be sent to the editor.

Acknowledgements. We want to take the opportunity to thank the Plants Officer of IUCN /SSC, Wendy Strahm, for her continuing efforts and input in making this Specialist Group come alive. Also, we thank Hajo Schmitz-Kretschmer for his work on editing this first Newsletter issue. The production and mailing of this Newsletter was made possible by the support of the German *Federal Agency for Nature Conservation*.

Tony Cunningham, Uwe Schippmann

What is IUCN? What is SSC?



The MPSG is one of 102 Specialist Groups within IUCN's *Species Survival Commission* (SSC). One of the largest and most active of IUCN The World Conservation Union's six volunteer commissions, the SSC network encompasses 6,000 volunteer member scientists, field researchers, government officials and conserva-

tion leaders from 169 countries. SSC members provide technical and scientific counsel for biodiversity conservation projects throughout the world. They provide advisory support to governments, international conventions, and conservation organizations.

The SSC works primarily through its Specialist Groups, most of which represent particular plant and animal groups that are threatened with extinction, or are of special importance for human welfare. A few groups deal with cross-cutting species conservation issues, such as veterinary medicine, conservation breeding and propagation, reintroducing species into their former ranges, invasive species, sustainable use of wildlife. Of the total 102 Specialist Groups about 20 are dealing with plant conservation issues.

Susan Tressler, IUCN/SSC, Chicago

Silphion - Our Logo for the Medicinal Plant Specialist Group

Our logo depicts the ancient *Silphion* plant. We have chosen this as the symbol for the *Medicinal Plant Specialist Group* because it reflects the long time that plants have been used and depleted by man. The drawing is taken from a coin from Cyrene which has been kindly made available to us by the Trustees of the British Museum, London (fig. 1). We are especially indebted to Ms Anja Seidl who has prepared the drawing of the *Silphion* logo.

The *Silphion* Story

Between 570 and 250 BC the majority of coins that were minted in the ancient Cyrene, a city situated in what is now the eastern part of Libya, carried the embossed picture of the *Silphion* plant. This reflects the enormous economic

importance this plant had for the city over four centuries. *Silphion* has been mentioned again and again in classical literature by Plinius, Hippocrates, Dioscorides, Herodot, Theophrast and others, so we know quite well that the economy of Cyrene depended on the utilization and export of *Silphion*. As demand in the Greek and Roman world was great and the supply limited, *Silphion* gained high prices on the international markets.



Fig. 1: Coin from Cyrene showing *Sylphion* (by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London).

The perennial roots and strongly ribbed annual stems of the *Silphion* plant were eaten in the fresh state and were regarded as a perfume, flavouring agent, and spice. The juice was employed medicinally against a wide range of symptoms and diseases, especially gynaecological ailments - it was a true “multi-purpose species” in the sense of modern economic botany.

It appears that *Silphion* was found only in the dry hinterland between Bengasi and Derna. Attempts to cultivate it seem to have failed, so wild plants remained the source of supply. For the first centuries we can assume that the utilization of this wild plant resource was sustainable. From 250 BC onwards, *Silphion* begins to disappear from the coins. There was a gradual vanishing of *Silphion* from the markets and it seems to have been extinct by the first centuries AD. The progressive extermination of the plant in its range during this period took place after Cyrene was no longer ruled by permanent local residents but by a series of short-term governors who may have tried to maximize the short-term benefits from *Silphion* utilization. This change in harvesting management could be at least one of the reasons for the dramatic decline in its use and its final extinction as an economic resource.

Botanists have for a long time tried to taxonomically identify *Silphion*. It is clear that is

has nothing in common with the North American genus *Silphium* Linnaeus of the Compositae family. *Silphion* obviously belongs to the Apiaceae family. Its generic affinities have been discussed at length by many authors. Names like *Thapsia silphium*, *T. garganica*, *Ferula tingitana*, *F. marmarica*, and *Prangos ferulacea* have been suggested. Judging from the many literature sources revised it is clear that the ancient *Silphion* has at least close affinities to *Ferula tingitana*, species which is rare in Cyrenaica today. *Silphion* may well be a distinct species of its own which became extinct almost 2000 years ago.

What we have before us is an example of over-harvesting and probable extinction of an ancient medicinal plant. *Silphion* reflects both the potential wealth through plant utilization and the possible risks and downfall through over-harvesting. It is well placed as a logo for the MPSG work.

Excellent summaries of the *Silphion* history are given in Moldenke & Moldenke (*Garden Journal 1, 1951, New York*), Gemmil (*Bull. Hist. Medicine 40, 1966*) and Strantz (*Zur Silphionfrage, Berlin 1909*). I want to especially

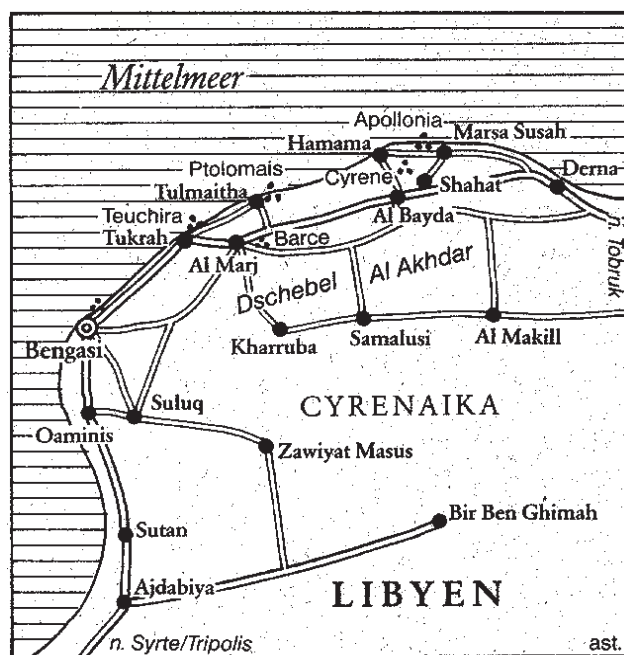


Fig. 2: Location of the town of Cyrene in Libya

thank Heinz Kalheber, Wolfgang Ludwig and Thomas Raus for providing me with numerous sources and their views on the *Silphion* story.

Uwe Schippmann

Membership

By December 1994, in a first phase of invited membership more than 30 members have been invited to join the group. Members were selected on the basis of strategic geographic location, professional interest, and their role as people who could network within their regions.

At present, the geographical focus of group members is as follows:

Africa	11	Europe	3
Asia, temperate	6	Northern America	2
Asia, tropical	7	Southern America	8
Australasia	1	Pacific	1

Concept and Working Programme

A draft concept and working programme was prepared in May 1994 and sent out to all prospective members. Substantial comments were received from Sarah Laird, Danna Leaman, Sonia Lagos-Witte, Christine Leon, Nina Marshall, and Vinay Tandon and have been incorporated. We are most grateful for these contributions. The redrafted version has been mailed to all members with this issue of *Medicinal Plant Conservation*. For all others, copies can be obtained through the editor.

The MPSG has not yet met, its programme and working concept will be discussed at its first meeting. In preparation of this meeting we would like to gather viewpoints in writing. We would therefore ask all MPSG members to comment on this draft and communicate your views to Tony Cunningham. The next issue of our newsletter could be used as platform for an

exchange of opinions on our concept and working programme. We want to specially draw your attention to the idea of drafting national reports which review existing information on medicinal plants and short-list species for special attention.

In 1993, WHO, IZUCN and WWF published the Guidelines on the conservation of medicinal plants. A few remaining copies in English, French or Spanish are available at the IUCN office in Gland.

Fundraising

As all other Specialist Groups, the MPSG has no regular budget allocated to it from IUCN. All funds to support the group, its meetings and projects have to come from outside. Efforts are being made to rise external funding.

Fund raising from users, governmental and non-governmental organizations will be carried out in collaboration with the SSC Financial Development Officer and the Executive Officer. Funds should be raised primarily to promote specific projects which the MPSG has highlighted as priority action but also for the technical support of the Specialist Group itself.

First Meeting

Meetings on a regular basis are essential for the group's goal of international coordination of the various medicinal plant conservation efforts. We hope that MPSG meetings can be held annually. To save expenses, we have decided to tie the meetings of the MPSG into ethnobotanical or other conferences which part of our group members are attending.

We plan to meet at least once before the next IUCN General Assembly which is scheduled for