

IUCN Media Brief: Pau Brasil

The main source of wood for professional violin bows



The World Conservation Union

Pau Brasil *Caesalpinia echinata*

Global Red List Status: Endangered

Proposal to include Pau Brasil in Appendix II

Pau Brasil is a slow growing, leguminous tree which has striking blood-red heartwood beneath its brown bark. Endemic to Brazil, it has been heavily exploited for over 500 years, initially as a source of dye and more recently for the manufacture of professional bows for violins, violas, cellos and bases. This species has a particular cultural significance for the country of Brazil which was named after the 'brasileiros' who originally harvested its dye. International trade and habitat loss have severely depleted this species which is now scarce in the wild and restricted to the Mata Atlântica (Atlantic Coastal Forest), an area of forest which now covers less than 8% of its original extent.

What are the main threats to Pau Brasil?

The invention of synthetic dyes in the 19th century largely removed demand for natural dyes but by this time, natural stands of Pau Brasil had already been significantly depleted. Currently, a major threat to the species is exploitation for the manufacture of professional bows for string instruments. Pau Brasil wood is particularly valued for its combination of durability, flexibility and resonance and is seen as an unsurpassed material for bow-making. It is estimated that a single violin bow costs up to \$5000 and uses 1 Kg of wood. Finally, habitat loss due to deforestation has also greatly fragmented and reduced the range of Pau Brasil.

Could Pau Brasil go extinct?

Pau Brasil is listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™. Harvest and trade of Pau Brasil has already led to its total extinction in some parts of its natural range. Known wild populations of Pau Brasil are small and scattered. The genetic diversity of the species is decreasing due to constant fragmentation and reduction of remaining forest areas. There is evidence of continuing high international demand for the species and indications of illegal trade.

Existing Conservation Strategies

Under Brazilian legislation, harvesting and export of the species has been suspended until there is sufficient scientific knowledge to guarantee the sustainability of harvesting. Attempts are underway to re-plant this species, although it is reported that plantation-grown wood is considered of inferior quality by bow makers.

CITES COP14 Proposal

The proposal to include Pau Brasil in Appendix II as it stands would mean that all Pau Brasil derivatives including musical instruments and other items would become subject to regulation under CITES.

For more information:

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IUCN TRAFFIC analyses:
http://intranet.iucn.org/webfiles/doc/SSC/COP14/AnalysesEN/cites_prop_30.pdf