

# The Effects of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) on Orchid Production, Marketing, and Conservation

**Ned Nash**

American Orchid Society, 3717 Essex St., Santa Barbara, CA 93105

**T**he American orchid industry has a severe case of bipolar disease, worsening steadily since the early 1990s. The symptoms include an inability to see beyond our own backyard, a narrow view of only the immediate effects of any action, and a belief that change is necessarily bad, unless it profits immediately. Nowhere is the disease more evident than in discussions of the affects of international CITES interpretation and enforcement. CITES, the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species, is just that: a treaty for monitoring the effect of international trade in animal and plant species that may be influenced by such trade. Most orchids are allowed to be traded internationally provided that the required documentation accompanies the orchids being traded. Hybrids and artificially propagated species are regulated by the “look alike” rule, where if a non- or less-regulated species or hybrid can easily be confused with a more regulated species, it is covered by CITES. Therefore, it is important from the outset to recognize several important facts about CITES.

By far the bulk (estimated at 90% +) of world trade in orchids is in hybrids intended for flowering potted plant use. Essentially all commercial shipments pass easily through port inspections, fully documented, inspected, and off to the production area.

Those shipments that are held at the port are often the result of poor documentation on the part of the shipper or as a result of some phytosanitary problem. There simply is not, despite the frantic claims of some writers to the contrary, a vast hidden conspiracy to halt trade in orchid species worldwide. Basically, those supposedly involved in such a conspiracy simply are not capable of sustaining the wit and guile necessary to such a clandestine and long-term action.

When do we hear about CITES affecting the “commercial grower?” When that one-in-a-hundred seizure occurs. We do not hear about the tens of millions of orchids that pass safely and securely through the ports each year. We hear about the 10 or 100 that are seized. A bipolar disease or misdirection?

What are the positive affects that CITES has had on the orchid industry?

- Production and distribution methods for species orchids have improved radically.
- Orchid plant quality has improved immeasurably, and costs have dropped.
- Developing nations are discovering a new sustainable industry for export income.
- Awareness of and interest in species orchids has never been higher.

What causes the problems laid at the door of CITES?

- Interpretation differences between sovereign nations.
- CITES use as a tool of trade restriction.
- Incompetence – either on the part of shippers or inspectors, as well as importer ignorance.
- Ignorance of basic orchid population biology.

Has CITES affected commercial orchid production and marketing? Yes, profoundly, but not in the ways most commonly referenced. Does CITES work as a conservation tool? Yes, but not completely effectively. Its legacy will be the building of databases on trade that will enable future legislation to be more effectively written and enforced, with fewer “gray areas” open to interpretation.