

TCM 101: A better understanding of Traditional Chinese Medicine can enable conservationists to improve wildlife outcomes

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The diversity of human cultures and traditions means that people in different parts of the world use wildlife products in unique ways. People use wildlife products for all sorts of practical reasons, including food, medicine, clothing and ornaments. However, the use of wildlife products is not always sustainable. This can threaten the survival of species, especially if they are already endangered. Conservationists who are working to solve these problems need to have a good understanding of how and why people use certain products, which may mean learning about cultures and practices that are unfamiliar to them.

Traditional medicines are one way that people use wildlife products, and different cultures around the world have developed a number of such medicinal practices over time. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has been practiced for thousands of years, and millions of people around the world continue to rely on it for their health and wellbeing. Like mainstream Western biomedicine, TCM aims to treat illnesses and improve people's health, but does so with treatments like herbal medicines. These are prepared from an array of more than 10,000 medicinal ingredients, some of which are derived from endangered or protected species. Well-known and well-publicized examples include tiger bone, rhino horn and bear bile.

In order to engage constructively with TCM stakeholders and to build effective, lasting solutions, conservationists need a basic understanding of TCM. This is because a cultural understanding would allow

conservationists to design solutions that are more likely to elicit a positive response from their intended audience and thus are the most likely to secure positive conservation outcomes. Despite the usefulness of this knowledge, since many TCM concepts are incompatible with more familiar biomedical sciences, it is often challenging for conservationists to have great familiarity with TCM. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore the core philosophies, theories and practices of TCM in order to make TCM more accessible to conservation scientists and practitioners.



Traditional Chinese Medicine makes use of many different wildlife products to treat illnesses, some of which come from endangered species. Building a better understanding of Traditional Chinese Medicine could help conservationists find more effective solutions and facilitate positive outcomes for these species (image credit: E.J. Milner-Gulland).

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