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Viagra Swells Scarce Animal Count

Stewart Taggart  10.29.02 | 2:00 AM

Men definitely get a lift from the anti-impotence drug Viagra. Now there's evidence that threatened animal species may also benefit, say two researchers.

Since the blockbuster treatment went on sale in 1998, there's been a marked drop in global demand for animal products used in traditional Chinese medicine -- like Alaskan reindeer antler velvet and Canadian seal penises.

"The evidence is still merely suggestive," says [Bill von Hippel](#), a psychology professor at the University of New South Wales in Australia. "But it'll be nice if it turns out to be true."

From 1997 to 1998, sales of Alaskan reindeer antler velvet, used as an anti-impotence drug in traditional Chinese medicine, dropped 72 percent worldwide. While sales had been down since 1990, the 1997-98 drop was the biggest since record keeping began in 1972, says von Hippel.

Meanwhile, sales of the penises of Canadian hooded and harp seals fell by half between 1996 and 1998, and to near zero in 2000, he added.

As part of their research, von Hippel and his brother, Frank, a biologist at the University of Alaska, studied trade data on legally harvested species used for impotence treatment in traditional Chinese medicine before and after Viagra went on sale. They limited their focus to trade in animal parts selling for more than \$8 to \$10 -- the price per pill for Viagra.

"Because market forces are driving the overcollection of and subsequent threat to some species, the elimination of these market forces may prove to be the most effective conservation solution," the brothers wrote in a paper published in the September issue of the journal [Environmental Conservation](#).

While they admit the drop in demand could have been caused in part by other factors -- such as the East Asian economic crisis, lower prices for Canadian seal pelts and meat, and reductions in a Canadian fuel subsidy -- the von Hippel brothers believe a statistical correlation exists.

If confirmed by additional research, Viagra's commercial success could mean good news for a host of other wild animals, such as pipefish, seahorses, sea cucumbers and North American elk, also sought for use in impotence treatments. While these animal parts may have a long history of use in Chinese folk medicine, none has proven effective under Western standards of double-blind testing with placebos as a control group, Bill von Hippel says.

One reason the brothers selected Viagra for study was that its effects are undeniable.

"While there are many Western medicines that do much the same thing as Chinese traditional medicines, East Asians are typically suspicious of Western medical products," Frank von Hippel says. "What's different about Viagra is that its effect is so immediate and visible."

Since completing their trade data study, the brothers have interviewed 100 Hong Kong apothecaries about demand for traditional remedies since Viagra came on the market. While that research isn't complete, early indications show the results support their first study's conclusions, Bill von Hippel says. Later, the brothers hope to conduct a survey of users of traditional Chinese medicines.

"If apothecary and user-level data confirm the trade data, we could have a really good story linking Viagra and conservation," von Hippel says. However, he cautions, the good news may only go so far. Many Asians remain deeply committed to traditional medicines, using Western medicine only for highly specific ailments.

Jill Robinson, founder and CEO of the Hong Kong-based [Animals Asia Foundation](#), says the von Hippels' work mirrors her organization's findings.

"While Viagra has enormous potential, the transition (away from using animal parts) is clearly not happening quickly enough -- and the reduction in demand still remains very small," she says. For instance, black-market versions of Viagra for sale in China often contain animal parts as a "booster," she says.

What's more, different parts of the same animal can be used for different treatments, which also could limit the overall benefits to threatened species from an individual wonder drug such as Viagra.