



Aromatic Heritage

Safeguarding the Scents of Culture, Memory, and Biodiversity

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At MONDIACULT 2022, ministers of culture from around the world came together in a historic affirmation: culture is a fundamental human right, a global public good, and an essential driver of sustainable development. As we look ahead to MONDIACULT 2025 in Barcelona, the World Sensorium Conservancy joins this global gathering with a message of urgency and possibility—one rooted in a vital yet often overlooked dimension of our shared humanity: aromatic heritage.

Aromatic heritage, also known as cultural olfactory heritage, is a living archive of human experience. It encompasses the plants, places, rituals, practices, and memories carried through scent—scents that have shaped cultural identity, ecological knowledge,

and emotional resilience for millennia. The smell of frankincense rising in sacred ceremonies, the smoky peat fires of rural Ireland, the sweet jasmine of celebration in South Asia, these are not just fragrances, but expressions of identity, place, and belonging. They are bridges between generations, between the natural world and the cultural imagination.

Yet this profound heritage is at risk. As climate change, biodiversity loss, modernization, and cultural homogenization accelerate, we face the erosion of our world's olfactory wisdom, the quiet extinction of scent memories that once anchored communities in meaning and place. Now is the time to act, before the scents that once defined us vanish into silence.

The Science and Soul of Aromatic Heritage

Aromatic heritage is both tangible and intangible. It includes the plants themselves—sandalwood, oud, rose, thyme, and the knowledge systems, oral traditions, and spiritual practices that surround them. Recognized under the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, it remains an underrepresented field in conservation and cultural policy. Yet its significance is profound.

Intangible Cultural Heritage:

Across the globe, aromatic plants are deeply embedded in ritual, medicine, and identity. Frankincense (*Boswellia spp.*) and myrrh (*Commiphora spp.*) have been burned in spiritual rites for over 3,000 years in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Juniper smoke purifies Tibetan Buddhist temples; sandalwood (*Santalum album*) perfumes Hindu ceremonies; and *Cyperus articulatus*, known as Gowe, is burned in West African homes to connect with ancestors.

Every year, in a deeply symbolic and spiritual ritual, the sacred Kaaba in Mecca is washed with rose water, a practice that reflects reverence, purity, and renewal. This cleansing ceremony, typically conducted before the holy month of Ramadan or during the month of Muharram, involves high-ranking religious and state officials who carefully wash the interior walls of the Kaaba with fragrant rose water. The ritual, steeped in centuries of tradition, underscores the sanctity of Islam's holiest site and the profound sensory connection between scent, devotion, and sacred space.

These traditions hold centuries of ecological wisdom and cultural continuity.

Memory and Identity:

Modern neuroscience confirms what cultures have long known: the sense of smell is intimately tied to memory and emotion. Olfactory signals travel directly to the limbic system—the brain's center for memory and feeling—making scent a powerful trigger of personal and collective identity. The smell of wild thyme in the Mediterranean or peat smoke in Ireland conjures not only landscapes but the stories, struggles, and songs of the people who dwell there.

Ecological Stewardship:

Traditional knowledge systems often include sustainable cultivation, harvesting, and processing methods for aromatic plants. In India, *Mitti Attar*, a perfume made from the scent of monsoon rains on dry earth, is a living testament to ecological literacy and sensory connection to the land. These practices preserve biodiversity and foster economic resilience, especially for Indigenous and local communities.

Threats to Aromatic Heritage

This living heritage is increasingly endangered. Iconic aromatic species such as sandalwood, oud (*Aquilaria spp.*), and rosewood face extinction from overharvesting and habitat destruction. Climate change alters the chemistry of plants, diminishing

their aromatic compounds and disrupting traditional uses. Meanwhile, rapid urbanization, migration, and the loss of oral traditions break the chain of knowledge transmission across generations.

A Global Archive of Scent

The World Sensorium Conservancy has created a growing global archive of aromatic heritage at www.worldsensorium.com. Each country page offers a sensory journey into the aromatic plant chosen by that nation as most culturally resonant—a selection grounded in historical, medicinal, and emotional significance.

These digital pages document:

- The nation's chosen aromatic plant and its botanical profile
- Cultural uses and traditional applications in rituals, medicine, and daily life

- Ecological context and conservation status
- Olfactory description and sensory connections to memory
- Scientific insights into aromatic compounds and bioactivity

From Afghanistan's *Rosa damascena* to the floral lexicon of Tamil Nadu, these profiles weave together a global scent map, a living cartography of culture, nature, and memory. Together, they underscore the deep connections between biodiversity and cultural diversity, and the urgent need to protect both.

Ireland and Its Aromatic Heritage

The Conservancy's recent documentary, *Ireland and Its Aromatic Heritage*, exemplifies how scent captures both environmental and cultural transformations. As Ireland phases out peat harvesting in response to climate imperatives, the film documents the profound role of peat smoke in shaping identity, kinship, and belonging. Native aromatic plants like bog myrtle and meadowsweet tell parallel stories of resilience and change. Scent becomes a witness, a testimony, and a thread of continuity amid disruption.

[Watch the documentary.](#)

Recommendations for Action

To preserve and revitalize aromatic heritage, we urge national delegates and cultural leaders to take the following actions:

- Include aromatic heritage under national heritage laws and UNESCO protection mechanisms
- Actively engaged in Best Practices for the Conservation of Aromatic and Medicinal Plants (AMPs)

AMPs: Aromatic and Medicinal Plants

TEK: Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Situ Conservation (Protecting Plants in Their Natural Habitats)

- **Protect native habitats:** Designate protected areas (e.g., biosphere reserves, community-managed forests, sacred groves) to conserve AMPs in their natural ecosystems.
- **Preserve wild populations:** Monitor genetic diversity and ensure populations remain viable through ecological assessments.
- **Integrate traditional land stewardship:** Collaborate with Indigenous and local communities to manage landscapes according to traditional ecological knowledge (TEK).

Ex Situ Conservation (Outside Natural Habitats)

- **Seed banking and gene banking:** Store seeds, pollen, and tissues of priority AMPs in secure facilities for future restoration and research.
- **Living collections:** Establish botanical gardens, medicinal plant sanctuaries, and demonstration plots for education and conservation.
- **Micropropagation:** Use tissue culture techniques to propagate endangered or slow-growing species.

Sustainable Harvesting and Cultivation

- **Develop harvesting protocols:** Based on plant growth cycle and part used (e.g., root, leaf, resin), limit quantities and seasonal collection to avoid overexploitation.

- **Promote organic and regenerative cultivation:** Use agroecological methods that maintain soil health, water retention, and pollinator diversity.
- **Encourage intercropping and mixed-use gardens:** Combine AMPs with food crops or other useful plants to enhance biodiversity and resilience.

Documentation and Research

- **Ethnobotanical documentation:** Record traditional knowledge about uses, preparations, and ecological roles of AMPs.
- **Phytochemical and pharmacological studies:** Identify and study bioactive compounds, ensuring ethical benefit-sharing with knowledge holders.
- **Monitor climate impacts:** Study how environmental changes affect plant distribution, potency, and survival.

Community Involvement and Benefit Sharing

- **Empower local stewards:** Support training programs in conservation and sustainable livelihoods (e.g., herbal product development, ecotourism).
- **Support community-managed nurseries and seed exchanges.**
- **Respect Indigenous knowledge systems:** Adhere to the principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing.

Policy, Legislation, and Governance

- **Enforce conservation laws:** Regulate wild harvesting and trade through national biodiversity and forestry acts.

- **Recognize AMP hotspots in national biodiversity action plans.**

- **Promote legal protection of TEK:** Codify the rights of communities as guardians of AMP knowledge and habitats.

Public Education and Awareness

- **Integrate AMP conservation into school curricula.**
- **Raise awareness through campaigns, cultural events, and media.**
- **Create scent gardens and herbal trails** in urban and rural settings for public engagement.

International Collaboration

- **Support global agreements:** Engage in CITES, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy.
- **Participate in networks:** Join efforts like the Global Partnership on Plant Conservation or national medicinal plant boards.
- **Interdisciplinary approach:** Combine science, culture, policy, and community knowledge.
- **Biocultural conservation:** Conserve both the plants and the cultural practices that sustain them.
- **Climate adaptation:** Build resilience into conservation plans as ecosystems shift.

Conclusion: A Call to Senses, a Call to Action

Aromatic heritage is the breath of culture, the scent of resilience, and the perfume of memory. It teaches us how humans have lived with, cared for, and celebrated the plant world. As we face a future of accelerating ecological and cultural loss, safeguarding olfactory heritage is not a luxury—it is a necessity.

We call upon every nation represented at MONDIACULT 2025 to recognize and protect its aromatic heritage. Let us honor the wisdom of the senses. Let us preserve what we can still smell, feel, and remember—before these cultural ecologies are lost to silence and extinction.

This is our shared atmosphere of memory.

Let it be carried forward, one scent at a time.

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