Saving Forests and Creating a New Cash Crop in the Middle East and Asia: University of Minnesota

The high demand for agarwood—wood soaked with a resin produced by a small portion of Aquilaria trees in southeast Asia and Indonesia—nearly decimated the species. The trees produce the resin only when injured and, before researchers stepped in, usually when the trees were 50 or more years old.

Agarwood and its resin are highly prized in the Middle East and Asia, particularly in Islamic and Buddhist cultures, where the wood and resin are used in perfumes, ceremonial incense, traditional medicine, and other applications. Unfortunately, determining whether a particular standing Aquilaria tree contains agarwood is nearly impossible, so harvesters were felling and sawing up Aquilaria trees until they were close to extinction in much of their natural range.

Robert Blanchette, Ph.D., of the University of Minnesota, and the nonprofit organization Rainforest Project, based in the Netherlands, have jointly developed an easy and inexpensive method to induce agarwood formation in trees that are only three to six years old. Now, instead of cutting down trees found in the forest, farmers can grow stands of Aquilaria trees on plantations, induce production of agarwood in those trees, and sell them as a new cash crop.

This practice will benefit regional farmers and their local economies, reduce the threat of extinction to native populations of Aquilaria trees, and ensure a long-term supply of agarwood for centuries-old cultural and religious uses. The University of Minnesota has licensed the technology to the Rainforest Project, which is leading distribution efforts beginning in Southeast Asia. ■

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