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## Another large export of kothala himbutu

By Dinushika Dissanayake

The distinct dark rings on the light coloured bark are characteristic of the kothala himbutu creeper, a herbal plant well known for its medicinal qualities as a solution for Diabetes. The plant's medicinal qualities are well known in villages in Sri Lanka, where jugs are made with the bark of the kothala himbutu creeper, in which water is stored overnight and consumed by patients.

"Sri Lanka produces some of the best kothala himbutu plants in the world," says Dr. Victor Hettigoda, founder of Hettigoda Industries (Pvt.) Ltd., which produces the well known Siddhalepa balm and a renowned ayur-



Bark of the kothala himbutu creeper

vedic physician. Hettigoda Industries has registered one patent for this drug which contains this herb among others as a solution for the controlling and cure of diabetes.

The scarcity of this creeper and the time which it takes to grow puts it into the category of endangered plants in the island. Japan among other countries is one of the foremost producers of drugs containing this herb and owns ten patents on such drugs.

According to Jagath Gunawardane an environmental lawyer, of the 20 world patents that currently exist on drugs containing kothala himbutu, 13 of them are detrimental to Sri Lanka.

The identification of the value and scarcity of the plant eight years ago prompted export restrictions on the plant and its bark, preventing large scale exports of the plant to foreign countries. According

to Gunawardane however, large exports of the herb have now begun after a lull of eight years. "One month ago seven tonnes of kothala himbutu were exported to Japan," he said, adding that the plants had been collected from the Puttalam district.

A customs official who declined to be named confirmed the shipment and said that since the export had been done after obtaining the relevant permits, it was not illegal. "Though the shipment was legal, the question remains whether it was ethical since the plant is extremely scarce and tissue cultured plants are still in their early stages of growth," he said.

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Hettigoda of Hettigoda Industries elaborated the methods in which the herb is exported from the island, legally or illegally.

"They send it in powder form, as wood chips and even as wooden jugs which are made out of the bark of the creeper," he said. Adding a new twist to the drama, the Deputy Forest Conservator K.P. Ariyadasa said that no one can export forest products without obtaining a permit from the department. "If they are very rare medicinal plants we don't normally give permission for large shipments," he said.

He also said that the exporter must prove that the source of the plants was a

private property and that it was not from conserved forest land in the island.

"When it comes to large shipments, they find it difficult to prove the source as this is a difficult plant to rear and such large amounts cannot be obtained from a private land," he said. He also said that the department had refused the permit for such a shipment two years ago.

Controversy however abounds among the environmentally conscious in Sri Lanka, as to how the exporter of a shipment of seven tonnes of kothala himbutu was able to obtain the permit and prove the source of the herb to be a private land.