

A desirous plant

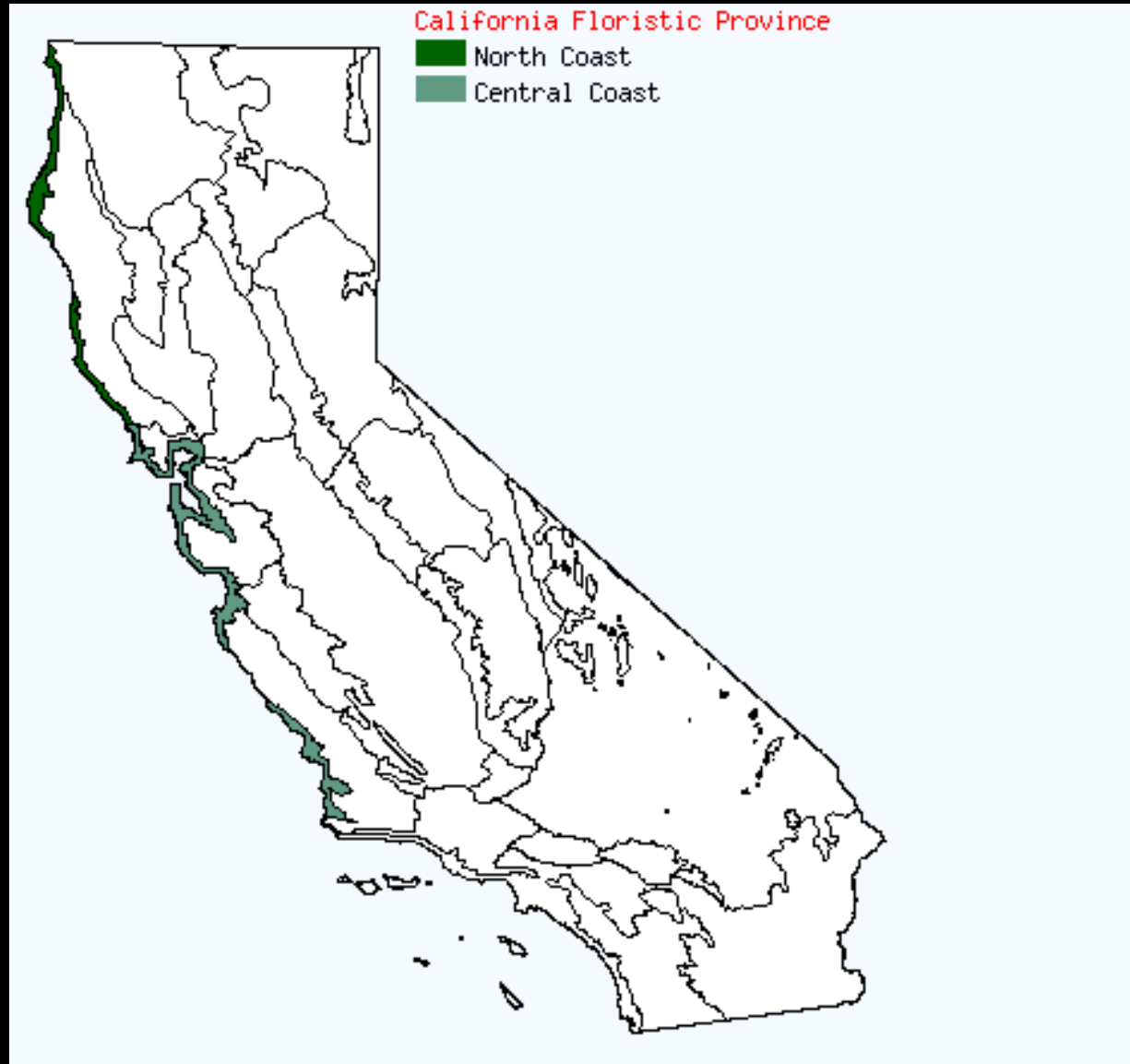
Xerophilia, Volume III (10), 2014)





Dudleya farinosa

Dudleya farinosa habitat range



Stephen Ward McCabe 2012, *Dudleya farinosa*, in Jepson Flora Project (eds.) *Jepson eFlora*, eflora_display.php?tid=23655, accessed on February 02, 2020.

Prominent hypotheses about the drivers of illicit *D. farinosa* trade

1. The increasing popularity of succulent plants in mainstream South Korean and East Asian cultures writ large.
2. The preferential valuing of 'wild' versus cultivated plants by South Korean and East Asian succulent consumers.



Discursive frames:

- *Profit frame*
- *'Asian' cultural frame and valuing of 'wild' species*
- *Pop culture / 'Housewives and Hipsters' frame*

The Chinese middle class – 430 million people strong today, expected to reach 780 million in the next decade, according to Washington-based think tank the Cato Institute – has huge and growing buying clout, and its impact on many wildlife species has been devastating, from [African elephants](#) (their tusks made into ivory trinkets) and [rhinos](#) (horns used in traditional medicine) to [pangolins](#) (both as a delicacy and in medicine) and [sharks](#) (their fins an ingredient in soup).

worried. In the Asian country, tending succulents had become a favourite pastime across generations, popular with everyone from harassed housewives to Generation-Z hipsters. And with all things Korean – from fashion and music to food and soap operas – grabbing the popular imagination in China, the world's most populous nation had caught a massive dose of dudleya fever.

Just when you think you've heard it all, something comes along to top the you-won't-believe-this list. Here's the latest whopper: Plant smugglers from China and Korea are raping and pillaging fragile California coastal habitats, in some cases rappelling down ocean-facing cliffs to poach native succulents and ship them to Asia, particularly Korea, where housewives place them on windowsills as status symbols.



The imaginary ‘Asian Super Consumer’: A critique of demand reduction campaigns for the illegal wildlife trade

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Response to “The imaginary ‘Asian Super Consumer’: A critique of demand reduction campaigns for the illegal wildlife trade”

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Understanding drivers of demand, researching consumption of illegal wildlife products: A reply to Bergin et al.

Jared D. Margulies ^{a,*}, Rebecca W.Y. Wong ^b, Rosaleen Duffy ^c



The Chinese middle class – 430 million people strong today, expected to reach 780 million in the next decade, according to Washington-based think tank the Cato Institute – has huge and growing buying clout, and its impact on many wildlife species has been devastating, from [African elephants](#) (their tusks made into ivory trinkets) and [rhinos](#) (horns used in traditional medicine) to [pangolins](#) (both as a delicacy and in medicine) and [sharks](#) (their fins an ingredient in soup).

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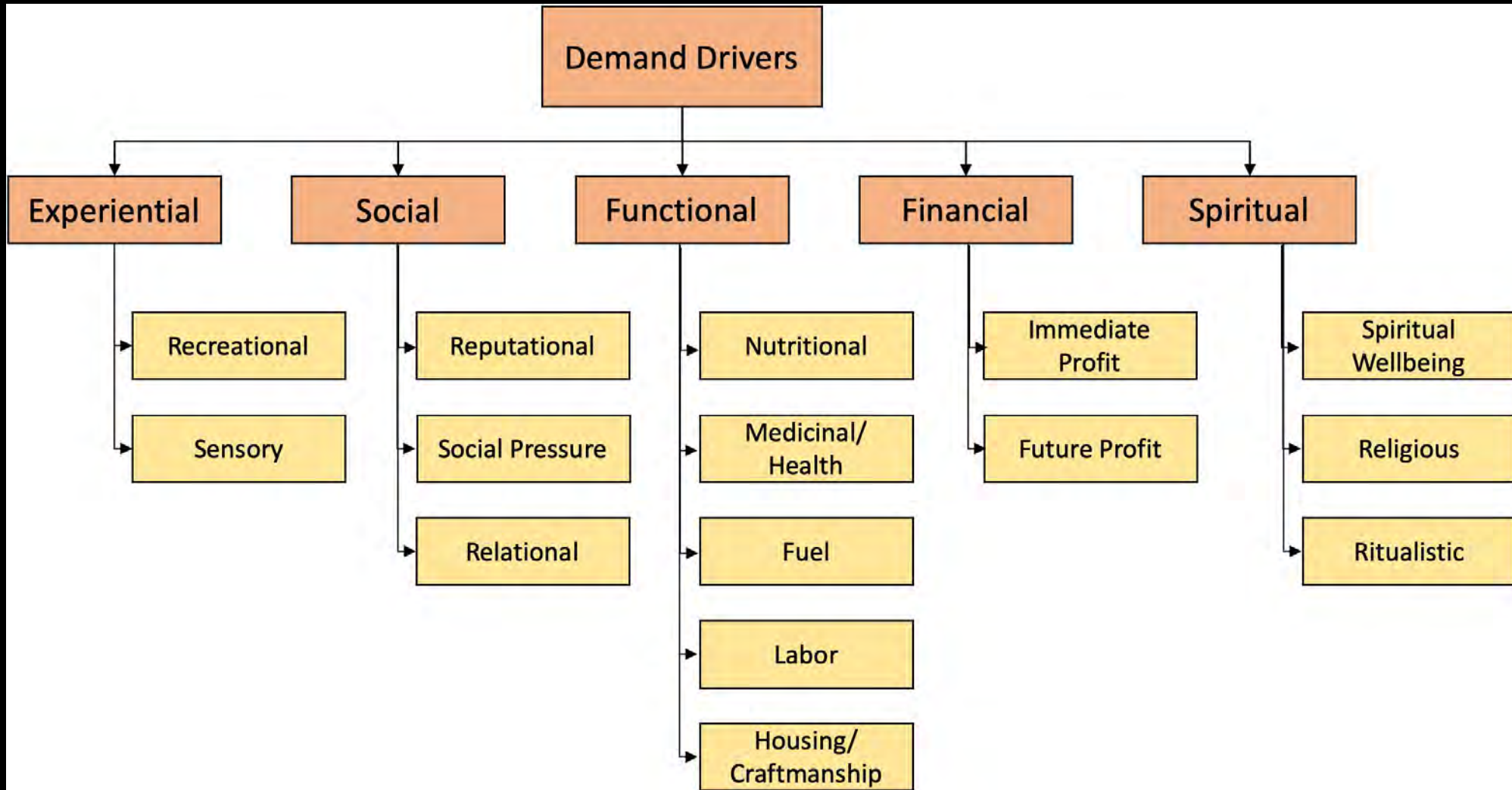


Figure 2. Framework for the motivations behind the use of wildlife products adapted from Thomas-Walters et al. (2020a).

Narrative Group	Motivations				
	Experiential	Social	Functional	Financial	Spiritual
News Media Outlets	Recreational and Sensory	Reputational	Medicinal	Future Profit	Spiritual well being
Korean Succulent Dealers and Collectors	Recreational and Sensory	Relational	—	—	—

Motivational framework adopted from Thomas-Walters et al. (2020a).

Table 1. Motivations for acquiring *Dudleya farinosa* by consumers as described in (a) new media reporting on this trade and (b) interviewed Korean succulent dealers and collectors

	Category description	Excerpts from news media reporting
Experiential-Recreational	Motivated by the desire for leisure or pursuit of a pastime or hobby.	“In the Asian country [South Korea], tending succulents had become a favorite pastime across generations, popular with everyone from harassed housewives to Generation-Z hipsters. And with all things Korean – from fashion and music to food and soap operas – grabbing the popular imagination in China, the world’s most populous nation had caught a massive dose of dudleya fever.” (Lanyon, 2018)
Experiential-Sensory	Motivated by the desire to please the senses, including aesthetic, olfactory, and tactile.	“Native Dudleya plants from coastal habitats in Northern California are particularly valuable in Asia due to their unique physical features, including the color and shape of their leaves.” (Garcia, 2019) “Those plants had survived in their natural habitats for decades through rain and wind. That’s what makes them beautiful. You can’t grow succulents like them with artificial measures.” (Horowitz-Ghazi, 2018)
Social-Reputational	Motivated by the desire to give others a certain impression, or to benefit socially; or to gain currency in a business transaction, or highlight social standing or wealth.	“Right now these plants are a boom in Korea, China and Japan. It’s huge among domestic housewives. It’s a status thing,” (McCormick, 2018). “I think things like this can quickly become a symbol of the middle class for the generation 30 and under [in China], it’s important for them to show that they are the generation that got the privilege of buying things.” (McCormick, 2018) “They want to have the plant that isn’t native to where they are or the plant that people see via social media. . .In this situation, a plant has become so popular that the idea that someone does not have it makes people go the extra mile.” (Garcia, 2019)
Functional - Medicinal	Motivated by the desire to treat an illness or promote wellness (i.e., curative/preventative).	Like cactus, Dudleya is a plant that contains water in its leaves and stems to live in a dry climate. It’s also in the limelight as an investment tool in South Korea for its air purifying effect and home decoration use. (Three Koreans arrested, 2018)
Financial- Future Profit	Motivated by the desire for future profit or an investment strategy.	“In South Korea and China, Dudleya is traded for \$40–50 per head. Growing its seedlings and trading them at high prices is used as an investment tool.” (Han, 2018).
Spiritual-Spiritual Well Being	Motivated by the desire to improve one’s fortune in this life or any others.	“The squat plants boast a geometric beauty reminiscent to some of the blossom of a lotus flower.” (Lake County News, 2018).

Table 2. Examples of excerpts of news articles coded by sub-categories from the applied framework of Thomas-Walters et al. (2020a).



Photo Credit: J Margulies

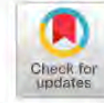




Dudleya pachyphytum
in South Korea
Photo Credit: J Margulies

Summary Notes:

- Plants are for select, advanced specialist grower market.
- Plants are not valued for their 'wildness', and dealers said plants needed a lot of time under their care to recover and grow out new foliage prior to sale.
- The thrust of what drove people to poach these plants relates to disjunctures between plant time (slow growth) and the capacity to meet demand (which rose rapidly, in part due to internet and social media).
- Plants in Korea were valued as Korean raised plants (not wild Californian plants).
- Trade is not restricted to East Asia. An interviewee from the UK mentioned an example of another collector receiving a Korean *Dudleya farinosa* that came wrapped in Californian newspaper.



Korean 'Housewives' and 'Hipsters' Are Not Driving a New Illicit Plant Trade: Complicating Consumer Motivations Behind an Emergent Wildlife Trade in *Dudleya farinosa*



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Illegal trade in wild plants receives less scientific and policy attention than illegal trade in wild animals and animal-derived products. One exception to this generalizable trend is the recent emergence of an illegal trade in the California succulent species *Dudleya farinosa*. US officials and mainstream media reporting on these incidents suggest the final destination of these plants is succulent consumer markets in South Korea and other East Asian countries. It is believed that this illegal trade emerged in response to sudden and widespread consumer demand for succulents due to: (1) the increasing popularity of succulent plants in mainstream South Korean and East Asian cultures writ large; and (2) the preferential valuing of 'wild' versus cultivated plants by succulent consumers. Based on findings from content analysis of media reports and in-depth qualitative interviews in California and South Korea, I argue instead for a more nuanced perspective of the drivers of this emergent trade, with the primary motivational desire for these plants coming from a selective and highly skilled community of succulent enthusiasts, rather than mainstream plant consumer groups. In presenting these findings I demonstrate the importance of in-depth, critical qualitative research for exploring the emergence of particular trades in wildlife in order to inform more sustainable and legal trades. I clarify the primary drivers of this new trade in *Dudleya farinosa* as an illegal but logical response to the economics and temporalities of plant trade. I offer suggestions on how these findings can inform more sustainable solutions to the illicit extraction of wild plants in meeting consumer demand.

Future Research Directions / Next Steps

- Running larger survey to query cactus and succulent collectors/hobbyists in multiple countries about international trade and CITES (in progress).
- Working to complete book on succulent trade by 2022.
- Applying insights from cactus/succulent trade to other endangered species/taxa here in the US: (e.g. pitcher plants, venus fly traps).
- Working with Botanic Gardens Conservation International (w/ Abby Meyer) to do preliminary study of potential for cycad certification program to reduce presence of wild-harvested cycads in US market.

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