

## EU Project

### “Interactive Conservation Platform for Orchids Native to Greece-Turkey (ICON)”



Programme funded by the  
EUROPEAN UNION



Implemented by the Ministry of EU Affairs  
Republic of Turkey

*Epipactis tremolsii subsp. Turcica* can be considered a kind of *Nature's Message* from Turkey to the Greek islands of Samos, Chios and Lesvos. (Photo: Nikos Petrou)

Harvest of wild terrestrial orchid species for the traditional delicacy *Salep*, used to prepare either a hot drink or to augment ice cream (*kahramanmaraş* or *maraş dondurma*), amounts to an estimated 60 t annually, which equates to the destruction of 120 million wild orchids in Turkey each year (Sezik, E. 2015). The *Salep* drink was once sought throughout the Ottoman Empire, even as far as Germany and England. Today *Salep* is still popular in Asia Minor where Turkey is the main consumer, as well as, in Albania, Cyprus and Greece. *Salep* is also used in Ayurveda and Unani medicine in India and Pakistan. In addition, the wild orchids of Greece and Turkey are threatened by habitat loss, mainly through changes in land use, especially in touristic areas, and through overgrazing, as well as, uncontrolled use of agrochemicals affecting also their pollinators. Orchid habitats in the Greek islands are particular fragile (Petrou, N. 2015). The Greek-Turkish biogeographical area includes an orchid biodiversity hot spot, unique to Europe and Asia Minor, with more than 400 orchid species.

*Himantoglossum comperianum* with its distinctly lavishly hooded flowers, is a rare encounter in few Greek islands, as Lesbos or Samos, but also now in Turkey due to habitat loss and the consumption of its tubers for *Salep*. (Photo: Alex Korakis)





*Orchis anatolica* became another tragic specie in Turkey due to its excessive destruction for the preparation of *Salep*. (Photo: Ekrem Sezik)

The genus *Ophrys*, the so-called “bee-orchids”, is most abundant in this region. They are worldwide famous to botanists for their remarkable reproduction behavior. Orchids are also called the “pandas” of the plant kingdom and present a highly attractive asset for a steadily growing eco-tourism. Despite the rapid loss of wild orchids, awareness among the general public and within the relevant authorities is lacking in both countries. The conservation status of native orchids is poorly known. The majority of species have not been evaluated accor-

ding to criteria of [IUCN’s global Red List of Threatened Species](#), nor nationally assessed. It is just a matter of time before this unique wild and beautiful orchid flora will collapse, irretrievably lost for the coming generations.

[Sails-For-Science Foundation](#) had submitted, as main applicant, the ICON proposal to the EU-Turkey co-financed program [Civil Society Dialogue between EU and Turkey - IV Environment Grant Scheme \(CSD-IV / ENV\)](#). The other applicants are also non-profit organizations in Greece and Turkey, the [Hellenic Society for the Protection of Nature \(HSPN\)](#) and the Turkish [Association for the Conservation of Antalya Orchids and Biodiversity \(CAOB\)](#). Our Action was approved to start in February 2016. Supporting associates of the Action are the [International Union for Conservation and Nature \(IUCN\) Orchid Specialist Group \(Species Survival Commission\)](#); Switzerland, the [Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew \(RBG\)](#); United Kingdom, and the [Smithsonian Environmental Research Centre \(SERC\)](#); USA. Our project aims to inform civil society in Turkey and Greece, but also competent local bodies and services, about the protection of their flora and particularly wild orchids. The core action is to create a common interactive digital platform and database for the species of orchids in the region. This platform will allow the exchange of information between scientists, institutions, NGOs, services, and naturalists, visitors with special interest in orchids, biodiversity, climate change

*Ophrys herae* was described first on Samos by Monika Hirth considered to be endemic for the island. (Photo: Giorgos Fakas)



and other demanding fields, but also with the general public. This Action will include various educational applications and, of course, due to its pilot character, will have the option to expand in the future and include the general flora of both countries. The project entails the creation of common protocols for monitoring rare or endangered species of orchids, information and know-how transfer to Turkish and Greek entities from EU environmental legislation, and implementation of the protection and management of species and regions, as well as, presenting relevant good practices that have been applied within the EU. Updated results of the Action will be disseminated through social media, printed publications, documentary film, exhibitions, accompanied by a series of lectures moving through three cities in Turkey and Greece, respectively, and a final international orchid conference (TORC'17) scheduled in spring of 2017, besides other planned initiatives.

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