

'Orchidelirium': how a modern-day flower madness is fuelling the illegal trade

Level: Advanced

1 Warmer

- a. With a partner or in small groups, order these famous expensive stolen objects from the most to the least expensive.

the Gibson Stradivarius violin

Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*

the Third Imperial Fabergé egg

the Hope Diamond

Van Gogh's painting *Poppy Flowers*

- b. Discuss these questions in groups.

- What are the most commonly stolen luxury or expensive items?
- What motivates people to steal or buy stolen luxury items?
- Do you know of any unusual items that are commonly stolen?

2 Key words

- a. Find words in the article that match the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. pieces cut from a plant and used for growing into new plants _____
(para 1)
2. the police of particular places _____ (para 1)
3. a failure to follow a law or rule _____ (para 2)
4. very successful _____ (para 3)
5. a room with glass walls and a glass roof, built next to a house and used for relaxing in or for growing plants _____ (para 7)
6. considered to be very important or valuable _____ (para 7)
7. a rare or expensive type of food _____ (para 7)
8. unofficial information that may or may not be true _____ (para 9)
9. examples of something, especially of a plant or an animal _____
(para 10)
10. the illegal trade, smuggling or collection of goods _____ (para 10)

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11. existing, happening, or spreading in an uncontrolled way _____
(para 10)
12. unclear, difficult to see clearly _____ (para 11)
13. removed or torn down completely _____ (para 11)
14. the act of growing new plants from seeds or from pieces cut from an existing plant, or to produce more plants _____ (para 13)
15. asks someone to do something, in a very emotional way _____
(para 15)

b. Use some of the key words above to complete these sentences.

1. I lost some of my most _____ possessions in the fire.
2. Abuse of power among senior officials is said to be _____.
3. The _____ of a petrol shortage turned out to be a false alarm.
4. The record company sued them for _____ of copyright.
5. The first recorded _____ of that particular fish were caught in the Pacific Ocean.
6. Caviar is considered to be a _____ in many countries.

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With traffickers taking species from the wild before they are even recorded, one of the UK's oldest constabularies is on guard at Kew Gardens

Patrick Greenfield

18 June, 2021

- 1 John Deer runs a peculiar operation. As Kew Gardens' security manager, it is his job to protect the 1.8 million people that visit every year. It is also his job to make sure plants and cuttings do not vanish from the botanical collection while the public are on the royal estate. To do so, members of one of the UK's oldest constabularies patrol the grounds and officers keep watch from a state-of-the-art control room.
- 2 "We've had people climb over the perimeter walls to access the gardens. It's why we have 24-hour security," Deer says, noting that there is still the occasional breach. "But the orchids, I would say, are more protected."
- 3 Orchids from all over the world are studied at Kew and many need special protection. Ivory and rhino horn dominate the popular perception of wildlife crime, but the colonial-era enthusiasm of wealthy Victorians for orchids, known as "orchidelirium", has taken on a new form today, with social media the focus of a thriving illicit global market that threatens the survival of some species. "Orchid influencers", complete with live streams and "unboxing videos", are at the heart of the modern obsession.
- 4 Security staff at Kew gardens no longer carry handcuffs and truncheons, or wear a police uniform, but Deer's team needs to be on the lookout.
- 5 Orchid thieves can strike at any time. "The particularly rare orchids at Kew are locked away behind glass cabinets so people can't get them," says Deer, explaining that some of the rarest and most endangered are kept out of sight from visitors entirely. "We're trying to protect the species. We have to make sure that they also have the right security."
- 6 Orchids are one of the largest and most diverse flowering plant families: there are roughly 28,000 species known to science and they account for about 8% of all flowering plants. They are found on every continent except Antarctica and survive at high altitudes and in tropical and semi-desert conditions.
- 7 Earlier, I had toured the Princess of Wales conservatory with Mike Fay, senior research leader for conservation genetics at Kew. Fay delights in the variety of orchids, detailing the complicated relationship between the plants and the insects, bats and hummingbirds that pollinate them. As well as being prized for their beauty, some orchids are considered a delicacy: vanilla is an orchid, as is one used in salep, a popular drink in Turkey.
- 8 So what is it about orchids that people love so much? "They have weird and wonderful flowers that are incredibly variable. Some are difficult to keep going, so it's a way of showing you are a good horticulturist."
- 9 Although rumours of single wild orchids selling for many thousands of pounds are common, the true scale of the illegal trade is unknown. Experts say they cannot make a well-informed guess due to the lack of reliable information but point to a thriving legal trade. More than 1.1bn live orchid plants were legally traded internationally from 1996 to 2015.
- 10 It is illegal to trade wild orchids internationally without a permit from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and for some, dealing in wild-collected specimens is completely forbidden. Despite this, trafficking of orchids is rampant, with many flowers sold openly on social media around the world. In some cases, new orchid species are being harvested by traffickers even before they are known to science.
- 11 "There is a lot of illegal international trade in orchids," Fay says. "If a new species is described, often the exact location is made a bit blurry. There are documented cases of new slipper orchids having been discovered in south-east Asia in recent years. And before they've even been officially described, populations have been stripped from nature and it is effectively extinct in the wild."

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- 12 In the UK, the lady's slipper orchid nearly met a similar fate. It was declared extinct in England in 1917 after Victorian orchid and dried flower collectors pushed it to the brink. But in 1930, it was rediscovered by chance and today is the focus of intense reintroduction efforts led by Natural England, its wild site a closely guarded secret.
- 13 "One of the things Kew has been involved with for 30 years is developing a propagation programme. We organized for the flowers of the native lady's slipper to be pollinated by hand. We produced seeds and those are germinated at Kew. We now have more than a dozen reintroduction sites," says Fay.
- 14 "That does have some risks. You still get some who want to go in there, pull them out and dig them up."
- 15 As our tour of the conservatory comes to an end, Fay implores me not to repeat the myth that a police officer sleeps out in a tent guarding the lady's slipper while it is in flower, no matter how much I wish it were true. But a warden does look out for the flower, and there is no sign of that caution ending soon.

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3 Find the information

a. Find information in the article to answer the questions.

1. What is 'orchidelirium'?
2. What is an 'orchid influencer'?
3. Why do orchids at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in London, need special protection?
4. Why can't visitors see Kew Gardens' complete orchid collection at any one time?
5. Where do orchids grow naturally in the wild?
6. What makes orchids special and so well loved?
7. What is the extent, and what are the consequences of the illegal trade in orchids?
8. Where can the native lady's slipper orchid be found growing wild in the UK?

4 Key language

a. Complete the verb phrases from the article with the words in the box. Find the phrases in the article to check your answers.

fate

form

brink

lookout

heart

1. take on a new _____
2. be at the _____ of
3. be on the _____
4. meet a similar _____
5. push something to the _____

b. Define each phrase by explaining it in your own words.

c. Now use them to talk about the article.

5 Discussion

a. Do you have any orchids?

- If so,
 - what type? Describe them.
 - did you buy them yourself?
 - were they a present?
 - do you know where they came from?
 - where are they positioned in your home? Are they growing well there?
 - what care do they require?

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- If not,
 - why not?
 - how would you feel if someone bought you an orchid as a present?
 - have you ever bought an orchid for someone else?
- b. **Have you ever seen orchids growing in the wild?**
- c. **Which other wildflowers from your country or area are protected? Do you know where they grow?**
- d. **Share any good sources you use to identify wildflowers and plants.**

6 In your own words

- a. **Find images of lady's slipper orchids. What gives this kind of orchid its name?**
- b. **Choose one of the many thousands of orchids in the world and research it so that you can give an interesting and informative five-minute presentation.**

Describe its features and characteristics, what makes it unique, its habitat, the conditions it needs to thrive, its growth cycle, how it is pollinated, how rare or common it is, its legal status (is it protected, rare, commercially grown ... ?), etc.