



Building the Market Chain

The Laurel tree in Syria

Building on traditional
knowledge to create modern
opportunities



Laurel (*Laurus nobilis*), an extremely resilient evergreen forest tree of the Laureaceae family, has been used for centuries in traditional Syrian products such as dried laurel leaves, laurel oil and laurel soap. Age-old methods handed down from generation-to-generation are used to produce unique products that are then sold in local markets. Although the local demand has remained stable for decades, export demand has grown recently, creating new income-generating opportunities for the local population.



In addition to being an important ingredient in Syrian and Mediterranean cooking, the leaves are used in traditional medicine; dried leaves are brewed as an herbal tea and are used to treat rheumatism, joint pains, schizophrenia, stress, to stimulate the appetite and as a sedative.

Although laurel leaves are the most commonly recognized product, the berries yield an essential oil used extensively in cosmetics and moisturizing products. The oil is also used as a cure for irritated skin, earache, asthma and urinary ailments. However, the main product made from laurel oil is laurel soap. Known for its unique perfume, it nourishes, softens, refreshes, and cleanses skin while acting as an antiseptic. It is especially recommended for sensitive and damaged skin. The soap is primarily sold to local consumers or to herbal shops. A small quantity is sold to foreign traders. Recently, some soap producers in Aleppo and Kessab modified the soap in an effort to capture new markets. These new products have become popular with hotels, tourists, and foreign traders.

Market chain – Livelihoods improved using traditional methods



For generations, the livelihoods of both the community members in the coastal and mountain areas of Lattakia and Tartus provinces and traders in major Syrian cities have depended heavily on the production and marketing of traditional laurel products. Traditional collection and processing of wild laurel leaves and berries accounts for about one third of their total yearly income.

The market chain is made up of collectors, traders, soap producers and consumers. The collectors dry leaves and/or process the berries into oil; the traders buy the oil from the collector/processor and sell it to the soap makers who then produce traditional soap for the local market and for export.





Laurel leaves collection and trade

Laurel leaves are collected from wild trees and sun-dried then sold to traders and/or consumers in the local markets. If the leaves are sold to traders, the traders then re-sell the laurel leaves to herbal shops in the local markets or to foreign traders. The leaves are sold loose without any packaging.

Laurel oil extraction and trade

Very few collectors harvest both leaves and berries. In Kessab and Kadmus, two Syrian mountain communities, villagers collect laurel berries and manually extract the oil using traditional, multi-staged methods. The whole berries are boiled in water for six to eight hours in a metal container over a wood fire. As the oil rises to the surface, it is skimmed off with a wooden spoon then filtered and bottled. Sixteen kilograms of laurel berries produce about ten litres of laurel oil. The quality of laurel oil depends on the fatty acid content which varies according to the variety of laurel used. Each variety is, in fact, characterized by the type of berry which differ in scent, size and colour. This labour-intensive process is primarily done by women and children in their home gardens. The extracted oil is sold to local soap makers, and herbal traders who then re-sell the oil at the city markets in Aleppo and Damascus. The price is fixed by the market, but can be subject to the oligopoly.

Laurel soap processing and trade

Laurel soap is believed to have been developed in Syria some 2,000 years ago. There are about 50 privately owned small-scale soap factories that use traditional soap-making methods. Most of the factories are located in the Aleppo Province.

The soap is made with laurel oil, olive oil (first press and/or second press), and caustic soda using a process called *saponification*. The oil mixture is blended with an aqueous solution containing the soda in large cauldrons.



This mixture is then heated to over 200 C° and stirred until the oil is reduced to glycerine and sodium salts. The caustic soda solution is drained from the cauldron and the soap mixture is left overnight to cool slightly; the excess water is then drained off. Once a solid block has formed, the soap is cut manually into square bars, stamped and stored in a dry place for at least six months. The process of making soap is carried out from November to April; from May to November, soap storage and trading activities are carried out.

Most of the olive oil (approximately 80%) used in laurel soap manufacture is locally produced, second quality oil. The cultivation and collection of Syrian laurel berries is not well managed. As a result, the potential supply of the laurel oil is not being fully exploited. Because of this, about 80% of the laurel oil used in the soap-making process is still imported from Turkey.

The quality of the soap is determined by the quality and proportions of the oil and the other ingredients used. The percentage of laurel oil in the oil mixture ranges from 10% to 60%; the higher the amount of laurel oil, the higher the price of the soap. This is due to the fact that a higher laurel oil content requires higher temperatures for *saponification* and larger amounts of soda.



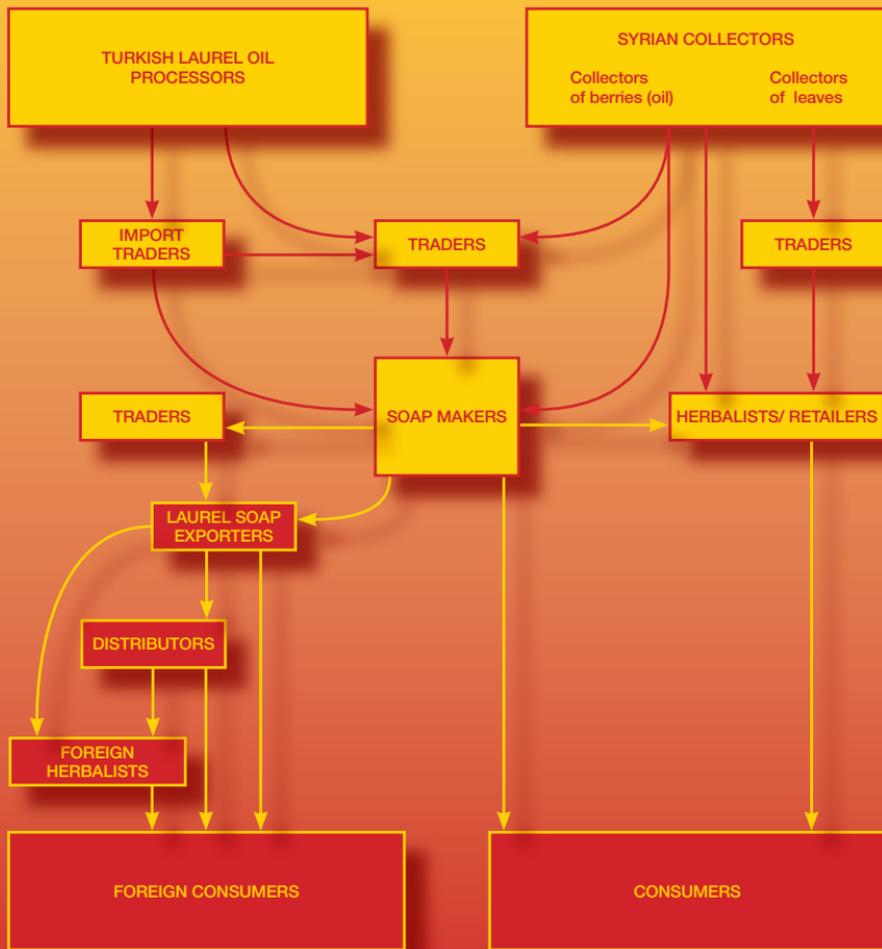


Consumers purchase traditional soap directly from the soap makers or in herbal shops. A small quantity of the soap is sold to foreign traders for export. Some soap producers in Aleppo and Kessab have recently begun to diversify their products. They are now producing a variety of shapes that have been received well in the hotel, tourist, and export niche markets. In addition, local consumers have begun to buy the 'new' soap.

Legislation affecting collection of laurel leaves and berries

The 1994 law no. 7 sets out specific rules and regulations concerning civil responsibilities for the protection, investment and commercial use of all forest species and subsequent penalties for potential abuses. The law is applied to state land, private land and protected areas. Use and trade of the laurel is subject to a license issued by local authorities. Any forest community member living within 5 km. of a forest area has the right to collect a limited amount of forest products without a license for household consumption only. This amount is determined by the renewable natural resource capacity of the area (e.g. 10 kg of laurel berries in the Kessab area). Detailed information on the utilization of forest natural resources is distributed through different legal channels, e.g. local farmers' cooperatives or Forestry Directorates. However, confusion on the application of the regulations often affects the optimal use of forest products, limiting the economic exploitation and the sustainable conservation of these genetic resources.

Laurel products market chain





Political reforms that need to be addressed

Better regulatory controls developed in partnership with the local community members are desperately needed. These include:



- Forestry community members need to be much more involved in the policy planning process;
- More work opportunities for the younger generation;
- Improve working conditions;
- Create international patents;
- Create standardized quality control methods for all the production phases;
- Develop a coordinated marketing effort.

Biodiversity marketing opportunities

There are a number of opportunities for increasing the production and marketing of traditional laurel products:

- Increase the international demand for traditional products while ensuring the traditional processing methodology is maintained;
- Creating a fair trade market channel with the European Community. Fair trade contacts could be established and the product adjusted to suit the market – e.g. adopting suitable packaging, supplying information about the product etc. This opportunity could increase the market benefit at family level; at present only the foreign traders are benefiting from export of laurel soap;

- Capture more of the local niche market demand by diversifying the product;
- Improve the efficiency of traditional oil extraction methods in order to: improve the quality of the oil produced; and to increase the quantity of oil produced to meet export demands.

The current situation

To expand the marketing opportunities for traditional laurel products made in Syria, several major issues must be addressed, namely:

- Lack of awareness and concern among community members about the legislation regulating the utilization of forest products;
- Lack of any organized community structure dealing with the exploitation of laurel;
- Absence of Syian laurel oil quality control;
- Lack of community-level support for efficient market strategies and little understanding of consumer/importer market demand;
- Poor packaging;
- No laurel soap quality control;
- No factory trademark for the international market;
- Very few local niche-market soap retailers;
- Funding and expertise is needed in order to develop market promotion on a larger scale i.e. using advertisements, websites, presentation of the products to foreign traders etc.;
- Lack of information available to the soap producers/traders on the local and international soap market;
- Laurel leaves/berry collectors experience difficulties accessing the market and obtaining price information;
- Lack of investment in the oil extraction and soap-making infrastructure;



- Poor work conditions;
- Lack of capacity-building mechanisms to support a laurel product-based economy.

Market Chain - The research process

The goals

Through the sustainable utilization of laurel trees and the application of indigenous knowledge and sustainable market access, two goals can be reached: a) improve the livelihoods of rural and forestry communities and conserve their traditions; b) conserve genetic resources of the laurel tree and the surrounding landscape.

The next step

The various Syrian laurel varieties need to be identified and categorized to determine which varieties would be most commercially viable for oil production. Once these varieties have been identified, cultivation and oil processing methodologies should be enhanced to increase the production and improve the quality of the oil produced. It is imperative that the current cultivation practices used by nurseries are identified and, if necessary, improved and nursery-to-collector training is implemented to begin domestic cultivation of laurel.





Research study

The information contained in this brochure is from a pilot research study carried out in Syria. This study looked at the overall economic impact of six traditional plant species including the market chain development for and the economic impact of these six species on impoverished community livelihoods. In this study, two methodological approaches were used:

The value chain analysis

An analysis of the market chain organization and the identification of the actors involved in the collection, cultivation, processing, production and trading of the products was conducted through focus group interviews

The livelihood assets survey

Once the actors involved in the market chain were identified, a household survey was carried out to assess the impact of the activities on their livelihoods

Many thanks to the following people for providing data:

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