

# DOES FRANKINCENSE HAVE A FUTURE?



## Unity?

Is the frankincense industry finally going to work together? That was the unspoken question on the lips of many attending a three-day workshop entitled 'Future of Frankincense' organised by the Global Frankincense Alliance (GFA) from March 17 - 19<sup>th</sup> 2021. The GFA, a small, specialised not for profit set up in November 2020 is committed to improving the condition of frankincense trees and the communities that live on them.

For many years disharmony within the frankincense industry has meant that there has been no proper leadership, no international trade representation and no regular meetings to discuss common problems and find common solutions. The fact that so many of the 'movers and shakers' in the frankincense industry signed up to the GFA March 2021 event suggests that there is an appetite for change.

## Pre-Conference Survey reveals valuable industry information

A pre-conference survey asking all 302 signed up delegates what they most wanted to get out of the meeting revealed:

- 39% want more data on the medicinal and cosmetic properties of frankincense resin
- 38% asked to learn about the sustainability of the trees,
- 31% requested information about the welfare of the harvesting communities
- 28% wanted to know where to buy good quality and sustainable frankincense.

One of the strongest messages that reverberated throughout the workshop was the need for a greater understanding of the enormous biological and ecological diversity within the 24 so far known *Boswellia* species. Delegates from more than 28 countries learnt from scientists and operators in the field just how incredibly varied are the environmental and socio-economic conditions in the 12 leading range states. The list includes some of the poorest and unstable countries on earth; Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, North Nigeria, the list goes on across Africa. Not surprisingly many delegates were deeply concerned about the working and living conditions in supply countries. Many, particularly the end consumers are demanding to know where and under what conditions their frankincense products are being harvested, cleaned and shipped.

Professor Frans Bongers, GFA Board Advisor and leading frankincense expert from the University of Wageningen raised the issue of biodiversity of the species. “There is an urgent need to identify the different genetics, growth patterns, agro-ecological needs, and socio-economic and environmental contexts of each species within, between and across countries. Lack of accurate information about the exact status of the trees in most range states makes it very difficult to make objective and scientifically validated recommendations about the industry,” he said. Bongers has spent more than 15 years studying the ecology and management of *Boswellia papyifera* in Ethiopia Eritrea and Sudan. Delegates from range states like Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya highlighted the importance of maintaining a strong and healthy links between harvesters and trees; a critical element in sustainable forest management, harvesting and product quality. A greater understanding of all aspects of the frankincense supply chain is urgently need as well as more precise information on harvesting/ transport costs and profit margins at each stage in the collection, harvesting, processing and marketing chain. Only armed with such information can productive discussion on such matters as fair trade pricing policy and codes of business ethics be initiated.

The workshop was set up in such a way that the audience could speak directly to field operators in harvesting zones using smart phones or computers. A further GFA innovation was to organise four regional resource group events before the workshop where local scientists discussed the future of frankincense with small groups of harvesters, collectors and traders from Somaliland, Ethiopia, Kenya and Oman. Their views were then presented at the opening of the workshop. This enabled us to capture the views and concerns of a much larger group of people than just those registered. By using Zoom and Whatsapp, delegates were able to talk directly to not only world experts on frankincense at Universities around the world but also senior management at some of the worlds’ leading retailers’ outlets.

### **What were the key takeaways from the workshop?**

On the consumer side there seems a genuine thirst for more accurate unbiased information about exactly what is going on at the base of the supply chain, part of a worldwide consumer trend to demand that retailers and online shops provide more information about where ingredients originate and how and where they are made, The present extremely opaque frankincense supply chains makes quality control and understanding of the true conditions in harvesting communities very difficult indeed.

On the supply side lack of information about almost every aspect of this product was repeated time and time again as a key lacuna. As Dr Anjanette De Carlo Chief Sustainability Scientist at the Aromatic Plant Research Center in Utah and GFA Advisory Board member pointed out, “How can we fix the problem of frankincense when we don’t really know what the problem is. How come after all these years we know so little about the science and culture of this tree which acts as a symbol of peace and a bridge between so many religions and cultures.”

## **Health claims and frankincense**

Health claims for frankincense abound in the western press but few such claims have been scientifically validated. The biochemical composition and medicinal properties of the plant has only recently been intensively researched using modern high tech analytical equipment. One such research team is headed by Professor Ahmed Al-Harrasi at Nizwa University, Oman. Harassi has assembled a world class team of scientists who are presently working on the genomic sequencing of all 23 important species of Boswellia. Members of his team attending the GFA informed the audience about the amount of misinformation that circulates in the media about the bioactivity, efficacy and use of Frankincense. They also urged the audience to consider the urgent need for more clinical research on the anti-inflammatory and cytotoxic properties of the resin.

## **GFA's role**

Denzil Phillips one of the founders of GFA and present Interim Coordinator pointed out in his opening remarks that the world of frankincense is very large indeed. The frankincense belt stretches from Orissa on the East coast of India right across southern Arabia and into the African Sahel and ends at the Atlantic Ocean. "Tens of thousands of people, many some of the poorest people on the planet, rely for survival on this trade," said Phillips. "Any attempt to radically change existing trade arrangements must be based on up to date hard evidence taken from the field."

"The GFA has no hidden agenda we just want to build a platform where people from all parts of this industry can meet and exchange ideas and information; a platform which is non-commercial, accurate and impartial," said Phillips. "To ensure that the GFA meets the highest scientific and ethical standards in January 2020 GFA established a scientific advisory board consisting of some of the worlds' leading experts in frankincense who advise on all GFA policy matters."

For more information please contact [www.globalfrankincensealliance.com](http://www.globalfrankincensealliance.com)

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