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# The Ancient Healing Resin That's Quietly Disappearing From the Earth

By bestfolkmedicine · 27/12/2025 · 6 min read



Frankincense—the aromatic resin from **Boswellia** trees—has been traded for thousands of years, burned in ceremonies, and used in traditional wellness practices. Today, it is also a key input for **fragrance, skincare, and aromatherapy**, which has helped fuel a sharp rise in global demand.

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The problem is that most frankincense is still **wild-harvested**, and many Boswellia populations are struggling to regenerate under a combined load of **unsustainable tapping**, **climate stress**, **grazing pressure**, and **fragile supply chains**.

What follows is a clear, evidence-based look at what's happening—and what can realistically help.

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### Frankincense comes from slow-growing, stress-adapted trees

Frankincense resin is produced when Boswellia trees are **wounded ("tapped")**—incisions are made in the bark, and the tree exudes resin that hardens into tear-shaped drops.

Key point: these trees often grow in **arid, rocky landscapes** where growth and recovery are naturally slow. When harvesting intensity rises, the trees may not have enough resources (water, stored carbohydrates) to heal well, reproduce, and replace themselves. Research on Boswellia and resin tapping emphasizes that harvesting carries real biological costs—impacting growth and seed production, and acting like a sustained energy drain on the tree.

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## The six main reasons we're "running out" of frankincense

### 1) Overharvesting and "overtapping" weakens trees over time

The most direct driver is **high tapping frequency and intensity**—more cuts, more often, across more trees—because harvesters are paid by volume and buyers want steady supply.

Peer-reviewed research in Ethiopia on **Boswellia papyrifera** found that **continuous tapping without adequate resting** can increase vulnerability to pests (including longhorn beetles), raising damage and mortality risk.
Other studies also indicate that heavy or frequent tapping is associated with reduced yield over time and higher mortality probability, especially when trees are tapped annually without rest.

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A recent conservation assessment for **Boswellia sacra** similarly highlights that resin harvesting creates costs for trees (reducing growth and seed set) and that exploitation pressure is a core

concern.

**Why it becomes a spiral:** When individual trees produce less resin (because they're depleted), harvesters often respond by tapping **more trees** or cutting **more wounds**—which accelerates decline.

## 2) Regeneration failure: seedlings and saplings aren't surviving

Even if adult trees remain standing, frankincense supply collapses if there's little **natural regeneration**—meaning few young trees surviving into adulthood.

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Multiple analyses describe Boswellia populations facing **weak regeneration**, driven by grazing, drought, and human pressure.
In frankincense landscapes, browsing animals (often goats) can repeatedly eat seedlings and saplings, preventing the next generation from establishing—especially during prolonged dry periods. bgci.org+1

This is one reason frankincense can look "fine" to the casual observer (mature trees still visible) while still being in crisis (no young cohort coming up behind them).

## 3) Climate change intensifies drought stress and extreme-weather damage

Boswellia trees are adapted to dry environments, but **prolonged drought** and increasing climate volatility can push them beyond their limits—especially when combined with harvesting injuries.

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IUCN-linked reporting and botanical conservation updates on frankincense species note that **prolonged droughts** and changing conditions can make sapling survival harder and can compound pressures from grazing.
In practice, a tapped tree under water stress has fewer resources to heal wounds, fight pests, and reproduce.

## 4) Pests and disease risks rise when trees are stressed

Stress doesn't only reduce resin output; it can also increase susceptibility to insect damage. The Ethiopia study above specifically links continuous tapping without rest to increased vulnerability to longhorn beetle damage.
When pests kill productive trees faster than new trees replace them, the supply base shrinks.

## 5) Fragile supply chains and low harvester pay encourage "extract now" behavior

A less-discussed driver is **economics**. Harvesters commonly receive a small fraction of the final retail price—especially when frankincense is sold into high-margin wellness, fragrance, and luxury cosmetics markets.

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When livelihoods are insecure and governance is weak, the incentive structure often favors:

- tapping too many trees,
- tapping too often,
- selling quickly rather than managing for long-term forest health.

Fieldwork and case studies from major producing regions (such as Somaliland/Somalia) discuss these pressures and the difficulty of implementing sustainable management where the market rewards volume and speed.

## 6) Conservation warnings are increasing, but protections are complex

Recent updates tied to IUCN assessments highlight that multiple frankincense (Boswellia) species—particularly on **Socotra (Yemen)**—have moved into higher threat categories, including Endangered and Critically Endangered, with drivers including grazing and drought stress.

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Meanwhile, international policy discussions are intensifying. A 2025 CITES information document specifically reviews **status, trade, and threats** to Boswellia and frankincense, reflecting how the issue has reached the level of formal global trade and conservation scrutiny.

However, strict trade bans can backfire if they harm local livelihoods or push trade into informal channels—so many experts argue for **better-managed harvesting, transparent sourcing, and local benefit-sharing**, not simplistic prohibition.

## What "sustainable frankincense" could look like

The good news is that frankincense is not "doomed" by definition—it's a management problem, not a mystery. The most consistently recommended practices include:

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1. **Rest periods / rotational harvesting**
   Resting trees between tapping seasons reduces chronic stress and may lower mortality and pest susceptibility.
2. **Limits on tapping intensity and frequency**
   Research on tapping frequency/intensity shows there are diminishing returns and tree-depletion dynamics beyond certain thresholds—supporting the logic of "less, but better managed."
3. **Protecting seedlings and saplings**
   This can include community grazing rules, temporary fencing, and assisted regeneration—especially in areas where goats browse young plants heavily.
4. **Traceable, fair supply chains**
   When harvesters are paid fairly for resin produced under sustainable protocols, incentives shift from "extract now" to "manage for next decade." Reporting on current supply-chain opacity and value capture highlights why transparency matters.

## What consumers can do (without falling for greenwashing)

If your audience buys frankincense essential oil, resin incense, or skincare, you can give them practical steps:

- **Ask for sourcing transparency**: country/region of origin, whether harvesters are paid fairly, whether there's a harvesting standard or community management plan. (Vague labels like "ethically sourced" without detail are weak.)

- **Use less, use smarter**: frankincense can be treated as a special, ritual ingredient—small amounts go far.
- **Support brands that invest locally**: evidence of community projects, regeneration work, or third-party verification is a meaningful differentiator.
- **Avoid "miracle cure" marketing**: frankincense has traditional uses, but exaggerated health claims create demand spikes and misinformation.

**Holistic health note:** If someone uses Boswellia supplements (not just incense/aroma), they should speak with a clinician—especially if they have chronic conditions or take medications (including for blood sugar). This is general safety guidance, not a diagnosis or treatment plan.

## Conclusion: it's not just resin—it's a living system

The world is "running out of frankincense" because we are pressuring a slow-regenerating wild resource with modern demand, often without modern stewardship. The primary forces are **overtapping**, **regeneration failure**, **climate stress**, **pest vulnerability**, and **economic incentives** that undervalue long-term forest health.

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For a holistic health brand, this topic resonates because it ties personal wellness to ecological reality: **you cannot separate "natural remedies" from the health of nature.**

## Sources


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