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Hot Spot

Busted for Iboga

Ibogaine enthusiasts get bad vibes from conspiracy arrests

Aina Hunter

Tuesday, December 13th 2005

A Wyoming couple was jailed recently on federal charges of conspiracy to import ibogaine—an illegal hallucinogenic drug reputed to be a miracle cure for addiction—sending a wave through the so-called ibogaine underground. According to a DEA agent's affidavit, Jack and Karen Hout spilled the beans about their plans to smuggle the drug from Switzerland to Wyoming via their condo in Belize when the feds raided their Wyoming home December 2.

Until now, many ibogaine true believers (some of whom operate covert "addict self-help clinics" in Brooklyn, Miami, San Francisco, and elsewhere) assumed powder made from the Tabernanthe iboga plant fell below law enforcement's radar. But the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration calls it a Schedule I controlled substance, and the Houts could face up to 20 years in prison if convicted in one of the first ibogaine conspiracy busts in decades.

The legend of ibogaine begins centuries ago with the root of a flowering West African rainforest shrub, chewed by traditional game hunters to help maintain perfect stillness as they wait for prey. Fast-forward to '60s New York, where college student and self-described recreational heroin user Howard Lotsof gets freebie capsules from a chemist friend. He swallows one, and to his amazement 48 hours later, his brain is washed clean of desire for any drug whatsoever.

The DEA bans the hallucinogen, but 20 years later enterprising Lotsof hooks up with fellow enthusiasts in the Netherlands and introduces the drug to people who want to get clean. He reports many successes: Patients detox in a matter of days, without painful withdrawal symptoms. And then there's the bonus—one last high. Boosters say the approximately 48 hours under iboga's spell are spent in a dreamlike state (or nightmarish state, depending on the individual) resulting in greater insight into one's problems.

Lotsof teamed up with respected neurologist Deborah Mash of the University of Miami: He supplied the ibogaine, she did the science. Serious concerns about ibogaine's safety and arguments over patents caused the two to split, but 10 months ago Mash got the money she needed to resume clinical studies on her own. Lotsof says he is currently involved with top-secret ibogaine projects himself.

That the illegal drug is years from FDA approval has done nothing to inhibit the proliferation of makeshift ibogaine treatment centers—sometimes just a borrowed apartment or motel room—across the country. Brooklyn is ground zero, but in the past few years what boosters call "the movement" has spread westward.

Longtime advocate and legendary yippie Dana Beal is co-sponsoring an ibogaine conference with Columbia University's chapter of Students for Sensible Drug Policy in February to spread the gospel to students almost young enough to be his grandkids. Tyler Case, a neuroscience and behavior major helping to organize the teach-in, calls the self-help movement a "compassionate system" that more people should be able to take advantage of.

"People just don't know about it. You go to the methadone clinic and they've never heard about it," says Mark Cochran, a 28-year-old former heroin addict and satisfied ibogaine user. Nine months ago, he says a clandestine drug treatment team in Brooklyn cured his heroin addiction at the cost of about a thousand bucks.

Testimonials like his do not please researcher Mash any more than news of the Wyoming conspiracy bust—she says she fears for the health of people who use ibogaine outside a clinical setting. She also dreads the damage bad PR generated by well-meaning self-helpers could do to future funding. "These people are desperate," she says. "They're going to be the

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