



Cycad thieves threaten species

By Sheree Baga

Andrew Hankey calls it the cycad orphanage: a cluster of over 300 of the ancient plants, many confiscated from the clutches of illegal cycad traffickers by the police.

"This is the only home they know," Hankey says sadly as he gestures to the cycad garden that encircles him at the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden in Roodepoort.

"There's nowhere else for them to go. We can't return them to the wild."

Instead, the plants are tended with abundant water and care - not that the rare species are always safe.

Consider that a rare cycad can fetch more than R100 000 on the black market, and often is ripped from its wild habitat or from the safety of botanical gardens and sold to overseas collectors who pay handsomely for the rare botanical treasure.

Hankey, a specialist horticulturalist, won't allow the botanical garden's rare cycads to be photographed for fear that theft syndicates will pounce yet again.

Over the years there have been several attempts to steal the cycads.

"The rarer, the more valuable," he notes.

That explains why the garden is now embedding microchips in the cycads.

"If a person is caught with a chipped cycad, it will be traced back to its owner. The problem is that people try to transfer permits from one plant to another. If that plant has a microchip, they could find themselves in a spot of bother," he says.

But will it be a successful deterrent? "Any measure is only as good as its countermeasure," says Hankey with a pragmatic shrug.

"They're not infallible."

Last week, Gauteng nature conservation officials and the police pounced on a Boksburg resident who had 210 endangered cycads growing in his Libradene garden and no permits for any of them.

Some of the cycads were termed by police as extremely rare, in a collection valued at over R500 000. Four had microchips embedded in their trunks. The man has been granted R5 000 bail.

In January, 103 extremely rare cycads valued at R10-million were stolen from the Lilly Cycad Reserve inside the Selati nature reserve in Limpopo.

John Donaldson, chairperson of the IUCN World Conservation Union's cycad specialist group, says: "What makes value in cycads is rarity, popularity and size. What you look at in very rare ones is the percentage of stem height. The rare ones sell for a R1 000 per centimetre. A more common plant is a couple of rands a centimetre."

The Cycad Society of SA agrees, and its Limpopo spokesperson revealed that a 1m-high rare cycad can sell for R100 000 or more.

Cycads are plant dinosaurs that evolved more than 300-million years ago. More than 50 percent of all species occur in Mexico, Australia and South Africa.

But it's in South Africa where many populations are on the brink.

"Globally we've just finished our cycad assessment and the four extinct cycads are all in southern Africa - three in South Africa and one in Swaziland," says Donaldson.

The three of SA's 38 species classified as extinct in the wild are *Encephalartos Woodii*, *Encephalartos Brevifoliolatus* and *Encephalartos Nubimontanus*. Twelve more are critically endangered and a further 13 threatened.

"South Africa has a disproportionately high number of critically endangered cycads. We certainly are on the cusp of extinctions. We have a lot of rare plants that are down to less than 100 individuals in the wild," says Donaldson.

Worldwide habitat destruction is the biggest threat with "a little bit of collection". But in SA, this is reversed.

"In South Africa, habitats are quite secure, but it's through poaching that we're losing our cycads.

"It seems South Africa is losing plants from the wild because we have a large domestic market, and plants can move from the domestic to the international market over longer timeframes."

Donaldson, also chief director of applied biodiversity research at the SA National Biodiversity Institute, says it is using DNA techniques to genetically fingerprint individual plants in order to stop theft.

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