

NEWS

140804. Cape Town. Conservation Research Horticulturist Phakamani Xaba walks past empty spots where Cycads were stolen at Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. 13 Cycads, with a value of approx R200 000 were stolen over night from the Botanical gardens in Kirstenbosch. Picture Henk Kruger/Cape Argus

Cycad thieves strike again

By John Yeld  Aug 7, 2014



Cape Town - Ten more cycads, most of them members of a critically endangered plant species and with a combined conservative value of at least half-a-million rand, were stolen from Kirstenbosch Gardens this week.

The theft, probably during Monday night's heavy downpours, came less than a fortnight after 13 of the world-famous garden's cycads had been dug out of its cycad amphitheatre towards the top of the garden, also at night.

These earlier losses, all *Encephalartos latifrons* or the Albany cycad, and the flagship species of the collection, had a commercial conservative commercial value of at least R200 000.

This week's heist saw another eight of this species and two *Encephalartos caffer*, the Grahamstown cycad or Rhini cycad, being removed.

Ironically, cycad curator Phakamani Xaba, a conservation research horticulturist with the SA National Biodiversity Institute, was travelling to Pretoria for a cycad conservation meeting when news of the latest theft broke on Tuesday morning.

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“So I’ve not been to the site myself yet,” he said yesterday afternoon, speaking at OR Tambo Airport on his way back to Cape Town.

The thieves had known exactly what they were doing and had obviously visited the cycad garden previously to check it out, he added.

“They were very meticulous, in a sense, in that they targeted the female plants that are worth more on the market.”

These plants were also bigger than the 13 taken on the first occasion and were therefore also more valuable commercially.

Asked for a possible price on them, Xaba replied: “Sjoe! It’s R400 000 to R500 000, easily.”

Because of the size and number of the missing cycads that had been dug out, it was clear that there must have been more than one person involved, he added.

“We suspect they came in through the top (from the contour path on the mountainside or from Cecilia plantation) because we’ve not seen any breaks at the gate or in the fence, and security combed the area pretty well.

“We had thought that it (the earlier theft) was an isolated incident, but we will definitely be upgrading security in a major way now.”

Additional temporary security had already been added while the upgrade was under way.

As with the first heist, the second theft would have a major conservation impact because of the scientific value of the cycads, Xaba said.

Cycads are the earliest plants still in existence, dating from 340 million years ago. They flourished throughout the Mesozoic age that lasted from about 252 to 66 million years ago – the so-called age of reptiles that includes the Cretaceous, Jurassic and Triassic eras.

“All the cycads at Kirstenbosch are scientifically studied – when they cone, when they produce suckers, how much they grow... So, yes, it’s a loss,” Xaba said.

Encephalartos caffer is a relatively rare dwarf cycad from the sour grassveld of the Eastern Cape found in districts like Humansdorp, Albany, Bathurst, East London, and Kentani and Willowvale in Transkei.

Although rare in the wild, it grows easily from seed.

Encephalartos latifrons is found only in the Bathurst area of the Eastern Cape where there are fewer than 100 of these plants – and probably only about 80 – still growing in the wild. They no longer reproduce naturally and have to be hand-pollinated.

In Tuesday’s story “Endangered cycads stolen from Kirstenbosch” (page 3), it was incorrectly reported that these plants had been stolen the previous night, instead of several days previously. The error, introduced during the sub-editing process, is regretted.

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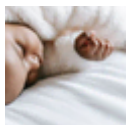
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