

NEWS 

Farmer accused in huge cycad bust

27 September 2015 - 02:00

BY JAN BORNMAN

Eastern Cape farmer Robert Biggs will step into the dock to face the music in one of South Africa's biggest cycad smuggling cases next week. He stands accused of being the supplier to a cycad syndicate, uprooting the plants on his farm and having them smuggled to buyers in Gauteng. Biggs, who farms near Jansenville, about 90km south of Graaff-Reinet, was linked to the syndicate when police and environmental investigators, acting on a tip-off, caught four men transporting 44 cycads without permits earlier this year. The total value of that haul was estimated to be R2-million. He was arrested following a raid on his farm where police found 58 other cycads already uprooted and ready to be transported. Biggs's lawyer, Alwyn Griebenow, said his client would plead not guilty.



State advocate Buks Coetzee said Biggs was charged with laws protecting cycads. He said there had been an increase in the illegal trade in cycads in the Eastern Cape, with 10 cases since 2010. It has become a lucrative trade as some rare species can fetch as much as R5000 per centimetre of a plant's circumference. Eugene Swart, one of the investigators with the Green Scorpions, said the illegal trade and smuggling of cycads was run like any other organised criminal network. "The smuggle routes come from all over South Africa, but the end destination seems to be Gauteng. It is here where most of the buyers are and some of them are very rich people," he said. Philip Rousseau, the curator of the cycad section at the Manie van der Schijff Botanical Garden at the University of Pretoria, said the illegal trade was fuelled by those who regarded having an old or mature cycad in their garden as a status symbol. "The growth of these plants is so slow - perhaps one centimetre per year - that people don't have the patience. They want to buy a fully-grown, mature cycad, which takes decades to reach that size." Rousseau said the garden, which has one of the biggest cycad collections in the southern hemisphere, was cultivating the plants and selling them below market value in a bid to end the illegal trade. "We are one of [the few] biodiversity hot spots around the world and we have quite a few cycads endemic to South Africa. They're part of the country's heritage and we should protect that," he said. According to the South African National Biodiversity Institute, 68% of the country's 39 cycad species are threatened with extinction.

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