



Guardian Africa network

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South Africa's ancient cycad plants under threat from poachers

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Mon 1 Sep 2014 17.05 BST

They are 340 million years old, outlived the dinosaurs and survived mass extinction in three global catastrophes. But cycads, the world's oldest seed plants, are now under threat as never before from obsessive collectors.

In two separate incidents in August, [thieves stole 24 cycads](#) worth an estimated 700,000 rand (£40,000) from the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in Cape Town, South Africa. Twenty-two of them were on the critically endangered list.

Experts say the thefts point to a lucrative international trade run by organised criminal syndicates that links poachers, often poor and desperate, to wealthy private collectors who [prize cycads like a rare stamp or first edition](#).

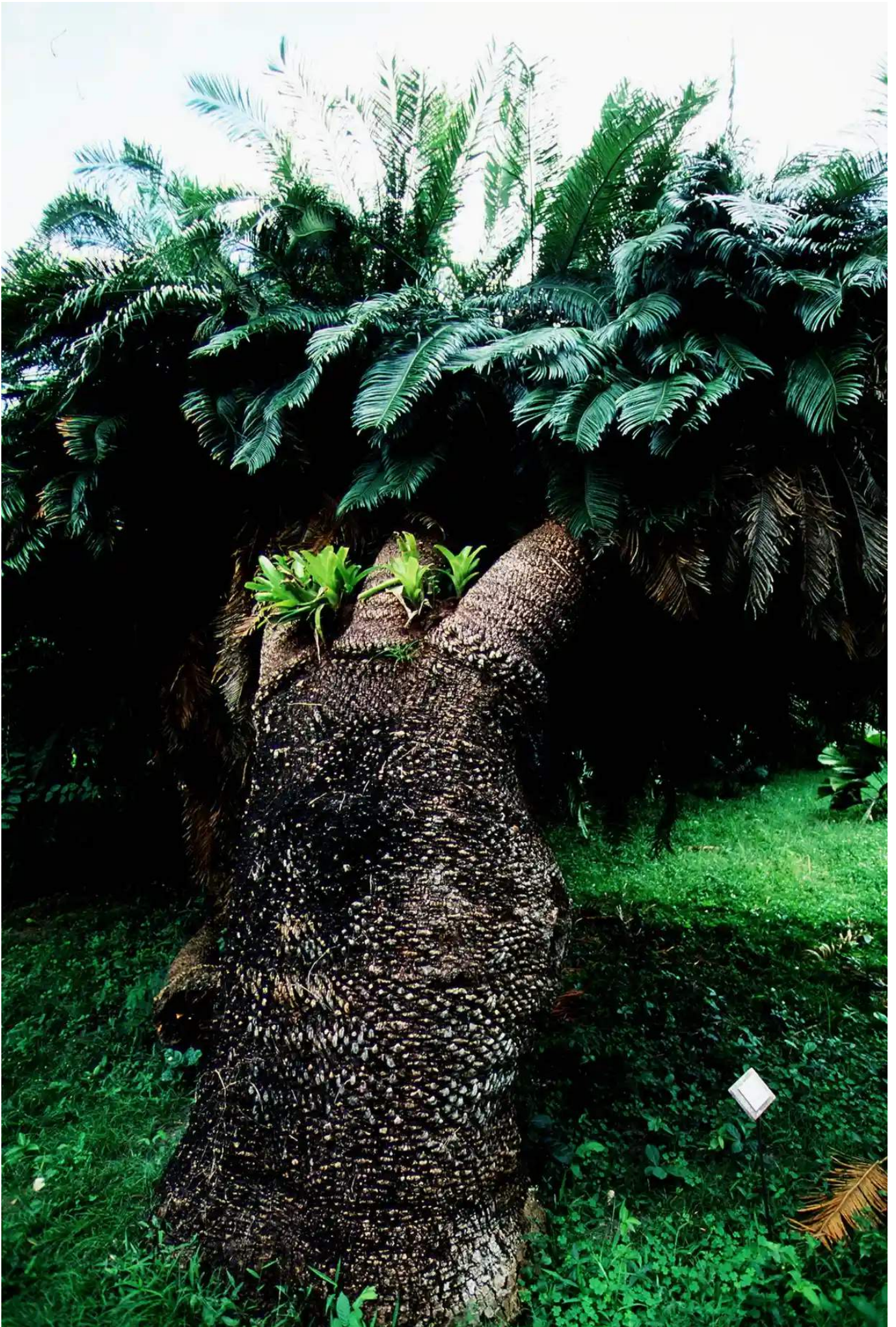
But compared to photogenic elephants and rhinos, the poaching of which attracts attention and resources, cycads are poor relations and little is known about the extent of the trafficking or who is fuelling it. Poachers act with impunity knowing they are very rarely caught. There are fears that, if current trends continue, these ancient, scientifically important plants could go extinct.

Cycads never produce flowers or fruit but rely on huge seed cones and beetles for pollination. Many contain dangerous neurotoxins or carcinogens, along with spiky leaves sharp enough to draw blood. Just 347 species are left today.

Some species have disappeared from their natural habitats and are protected in [gardens such as Kirstenbosch](#), which has been used to source genetic material for re-establishing wild populations. In the recent raids a total of 24 of the plants were dug up and removed during the night. Police have opened an investigation and the Cycad Society of SA is offering a 10,000 rand (£566,956) reward for information leading to the arrest of anyone involved in the crime.

“These plants become almost like your kids,” said Phakamani Xaba, senior horticulturist at Kirstenbosch. “When one is missing, part of you is missing as well.”

The stolen plants included 22 critically endangered Albany cycads, of which only around 80 are thought to be still growing in the wild. It is seen as Kirstenbosch’s flagship species, having been introduced in 1913 by the first director, professor Harold Pearson. The loss was also a blow because Xaba had been studying them for a research project in collaboration with [Kew Gardens in London](#) in the UK.



▲ A cycad in Zanzibar Photograph: Duncan Willetts

Xaba added: “The thefts impact heavily on our research and conservation work. These plants belong to South Africans at large. Kirstenbosch is just the custodian of them. When they steal, they steal from us.”

Cycads haven't survived hundreds of millions of years for nothing. They are slow-growing: a long stem can take the best part of a millennium. They are also tough and durable and can be left out of the ground for months, then replanted. This also makes them an easy target. “One of the reasons they get poached so much is they are easy to transport. The thieves would remove all the leaves then dig them out. They don't have a complex root system. They are very hardy.” Both the stolen species are indigenous to South Africa, one of the world centres of cycad diversity, with 38 species. Poachers have been active across South Africa for years, raiding farms under cover of darkness and possibly supplying hard core collectors within the country itself. But Xaba said he is also aware of big collections in Asia, Australia, Europe and South America. “By far South Africans are the most targeted and the most threatened. Largely the industry is here. If we don't do something, the rate of extinction is getting faster and faster.”

Kirstenbosch has beefed up its security measures, including spraying the stems of plants with tiny dots containing individual identity codes, but the deeper scourge remains. It is harder to mobilise action around cycads than **rhinos, of which 1,004 were poached in South Africa** last year to meet demand for horn in the far east. Rhinos are visible to tourists in Kruger park and private reserves, where some cycads can no longer be seen in their original habitat.

Professor John Donaldson, chief director of applied biodiversity at the **South African National Biodiversity Institute**, said: “In contrast to the rhinos and elephants where there's been a lot of investment in trying to understand the network and where it's going, we know far less about the poaching of plants.

“There is evidence of several thousand plants going out from the wild in the past couple of years. We don't know where they're going.”

With all its rarity value, a cycad is a hugely desirable collector's item. When Kirstenbosch put up for auction a sucker from its prize specimen of *Encephalartos woodii*, it fetched a price of 89,000 rand (£8,347) equivalent to around 1,700 rand (£159.45) per centimetre of the plant's circumference.

Donaldson warned that the majority of South Africa's “endangered” and “critically endangered” cycads have declined between 50 and 90% in the past 20 years. “We are extremely concerned about quite a few of the cycad species. Several in South Africa are now classified extinct in the wild.”

The institute is working with government agencies, the private sector and other

interest groups to draw up a cycad conservation strategy that should be finalised by early next year.

But some believe radical measures are necessary. Traffic, an organisation monitoring the global wildlife trade, has previously [called for a blanket ban on the trade in cycads](#). In 2010 the European Union imposed a ban on trade in cycads from South Africa.

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