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In May 2020, 10mm of rain fell at Sendelingsdrif Rest Camp in South Africa's most north-westerly corner. After enduring nine years of almost zero rain, Pieter van Wyk, a 32-year-old self-taught botanist who heads up the Richtersveld national park's nursery, was elated to see several species flower for the first time in almost a decade. The rain, including 200mm on the nearby mountains, was a welcome respite for the world heritage site's flora and fauna.

His joy, however, was short-lived. While the rain gave a temporary lease of life to some annuals and bulbs in the |Ai-|Ais/Richtersveld transfrontier park, it did little to alter the fact that scores of species, especially large succulent plants such as aloes, are in peril. A study to be published by Van Wyk and others shows that 85% of the population of the distinctive Pearson's aloe (*Aloe pearsonii*) - endemic to the Richtersveld - has been lost in the past five years, having been a stable presence for the previous four decades.

Pearson's aloe, which has been decimated in the Richtersveld national park in recent years. Photograph: GFC Collection/Alamy

Pearson's aloe is just one of dozens of species Van Wyk fears may disappear in his lifetime. The plants face a number of threats, but it is the climate emergency and poaching that are having the biggest impact.

When all is well, the Richtersveld's position in the Northern Cape, at the intersection of three biomes, coupled with its geological complexity - the park is