

'Tourists' bust for stealing rare beetles

JEANNE VAN DER MERWE

ENDANGERED beetles have landed four German "tourists" in court on bug-stealing charges.

The four, who the state alleges are insect traders, were arrested at a roadblock near Ceres two weeks ago on their way back from an insect-collecting outing in the Matroosberg.

They had more than 40 rare stag beetles — all dead — in their car.

The beetles, of the colophon genus, are a leftover from the Ice Age and are found around the world only in isolated pockets at high altitude.

Albert Rautenstrauch, his brother Günter, Wolfgang Schubert and Werner Lenz — all from Augsburg in Germany — appeared briefly in court on Friday and will go on trial in the Paarl Regional Court tomorrow on charges of illegal collection, possession and

transport of endangered insects.

After the arrest near Ceres, police went back to a guesthouse in Ladismith where several hundred of the dead beetles were found, along with scorpions and butterflies.

The four were released on R5 000 bail each by the Ceres Magistrate's Court two weeks ago, and had to hand over their passports.

Paul Gildenhuys, manager of Cape Nature Conservation's Environmental Crime Unit, said the maximum penalty for the charges was either a R100 000 fine or 10 years in prison — or both — and a fine of up to three times the trade value of the insects.

He said the beetles had a street value of up to €600 each.

Doctor Simon van Noort, a scientist at the SA Museum in Cape Town, said the colophon beetles used to be more widespread. However, as the climate warmed at the end of the last Ice Age, they moved into the mountains and

evolved into separate species. "The species is very old — hundreds of thousands of years, and there are at least 14 species in the Western Cape," he said.

"If you remove hundreds of specimens from a single place, it could well result in local extinction."

Professor Henk Geertsema of the entomology department at Stellenbosch University, said very little was known of the beetles' habits, as they burrowed underground and were found only in very specific places.

"Unfortunately, any private insect collection is not complete without a colophon. They have a high market value because of their rarity.

"The local authorities try to keep their locations secret to prevent international collectors from removing them," he said.

"They are truly endangered because as the climate becomes warmer, they cannot move any higher."



PROTECTED: Professor Henk Geertsema holds a stag beetle

Beetle scarce

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