

PRETORIA NEWS: 28 JANUARY 2006: p.5

Beetle poachers bitten by the bug

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German cousins Albert and Günter Rautenstrauch have both been beetle collectors since childhood and both claim to "love" their subjects and study them closely, working with scientists and insect specialists.

But their scientific curiosity and emotional concern for beetles and other insects didn't stop them poaching 211 endemic *Colophon* beetles - worth an estimated R290 000 on the international collectors' market - from mountain peaks in the Western Cape's nature reserves and other areas in late December and early January.

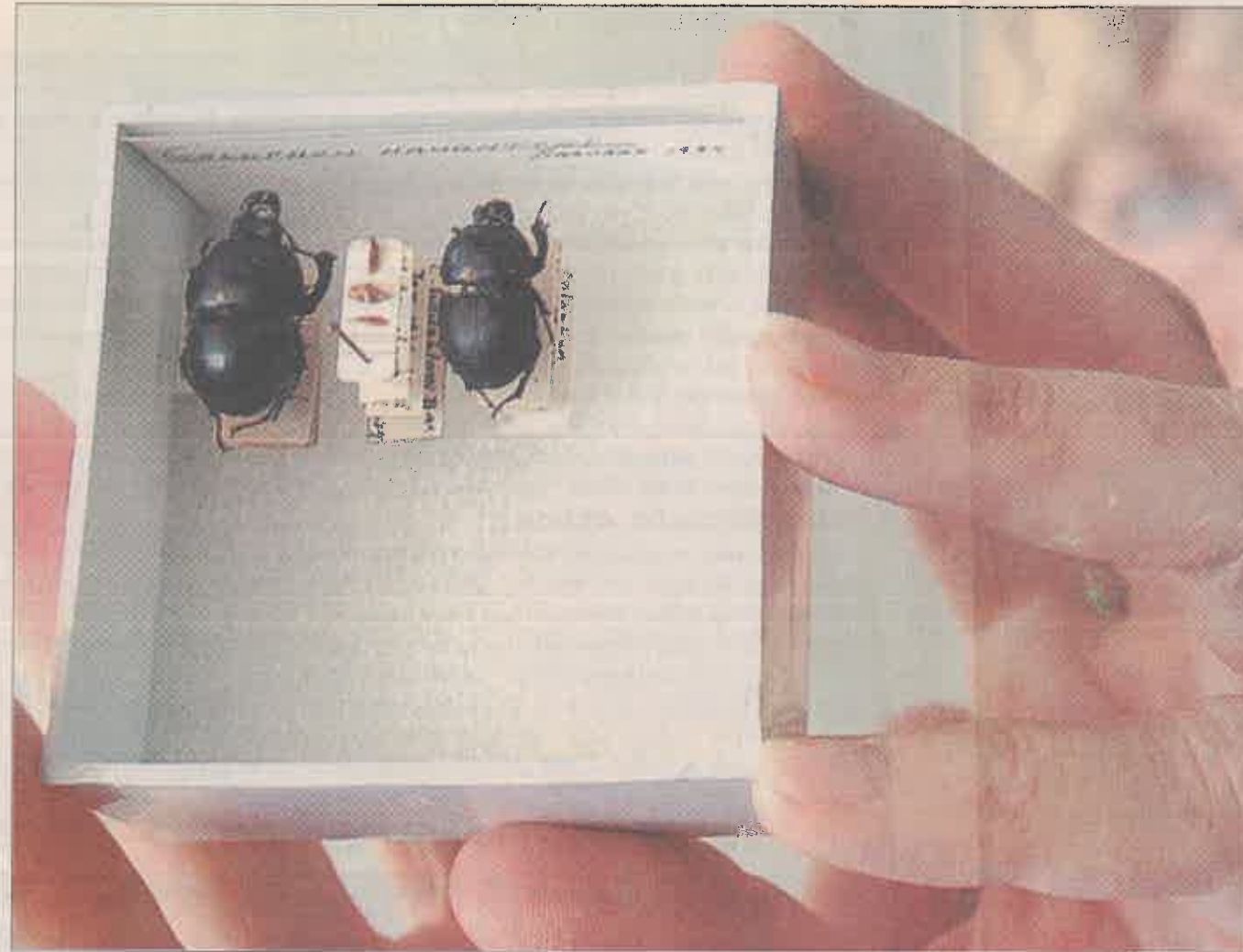
As well as the *Colophons*, they poached another 631 insects of other species - including termites, tapping beetles, bombardier beetles and snout-beetles, all dead when found by nature conservation officials - and seven live scorpions before being arrested near Ceres three weeks ago.

Yesterday, the two cousins pleaded guilty in the Paarl Regional Court to five charges under the Cape's nature conservation ordinance of hunting and/or being in possession of a total of 211 *Colophon* beetles of three species and the other insects, without the necessary permits.

The *Colophons*, also known as the Cape stag beetles and of which there are several species, are found only in the Western Cape.

Because of their rarity - the degree of rarity is still under dispute - Cape stag beetles have acquired almost "must have" status among collectors around the world and are among the most highly-priced stag beetles on the market.

The Rautenstrauchs admitted knowing that all *Colophon* species in South Africa were listed as being endangered and that it was a punishable offence to be in possession of these beetles without



Examples of the "Stag Beetle" of the *Colophon* genus on display at the SA museum in Cape Town. PICTURE: KARIN RETIEF

a permit.

They testified in their plea explanations that they had come to South Africa to collect insects and to have a holiday.

Each cousin brought a friend with them, and those two friends also each pleaded guilty yesterday in the same

court to one charge under the nature conservation ordinance.

Wolfgang Schubert, a friend of Albert Rautenstrauch who plays darts for the same club in Germany, pleaded guilty to a charge of being in possession of 12 *Colophon* beetle carcasses.

He told the court he had merely been

carrying them down the mountain for the Rautenstrauchs.

"Beetles are not protected animals in Germany or Europe as far as I am aware... I am not a collector of beetles ... I am also not interested in beetles and had no benefit in possessing them."

The second friend, Werner Lenz, said

in his plea explanation that he was a life-long friend of Günter Rautenstrauch.

Pleading guilty to one charge of helping the Rautenstrauchs collect *Colophon* beetles, he said he had accompanied them into the mountains of the Western Cape.

"It was only a few beetles (that I collected) as I was more interested in the environment and the beautiful scenery.

"By accompanying them and assisting them I was able to see some beautiful scenic places in the mountains that I would otherwise never have been able to see."

The Rautenstrauchs - who have a butterfly species named after them - both said they believed there must be "tens of thousands" of *Colophon* beetles and different sub-species, "because they are found in different places on Western Cape mountains".

"I would not be able to collect 50 *Colophon* beetles in one or two hours if there were not large numbers of them in existence," they each said in their plea explanations.

The guilty pleas were all accepted by magistrate Annemarie Immelman and the four men were convicted.

Paul Gildenhuys, manager of the Western Cape Nature Conservation Board's environmental crimes unit, testified in aggravation of sentence that he had done an Internet search and found four websites offering for sale the three *Colophon* beetle species poached by the Germans.

Taking an average price - prices varied for the different species and genders, from a low of 117 euros to highs of 600 euros and US\$920 - he worked out that just the commercial value of the *Colophon* beetles poached by the men was R290 108.

The sentence for convictions under the nature conservation ordinance can be a fine and/or a jail term and an additional fine of up to three times the commercial value of the species poached.