



The angulate tortoise, like this one in South Africa's West Coast National Park, is found only in Western Cape Province. Collectors snatch the tortoises from the wild and sell them illegally into the global pet trade.

PHOTOGRAPH BY THORSTEN MILSE, ROBERT HARDING/CORBIS

WILDLIFE WATCH

Big Illegal Market For Little Critters

There's a price on anything that walks, creeps, crawls, or flies, as a South African nature cop explains.

BY PAUL STEYN, FOR NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



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Some hobbyists collect vintage radios. Others hoard antique furniture, or stamps, or art, or war memorabilia.



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with invertebrate objects.

Dwarf snakes, dragon-like lizards, endemic alpine beetles, tortoises, orchids—to the wildlife collector, such curiosities from the plant and animal kingdoms are worth more than their weight in gold.

One place replete with unique and rare irresistibles of nature is South Africa's mountainous Western Cape Province—a world biodiversity hotspot called the Cape Floral Kingdom.

Earlier this year, a Spanish husband and wife team, Jose Maria Aurell Cardona and Maria Jose Gonzalez, were arrested in the Knersvlakte Nature Reserve north of Cape Town in possession of succulents without the relevant permits.

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Smaller species are easier to smuggle, so they're often targeted first.

PAUL GILDENHUYS, HEAD OF THE CAPENATURE
BIODIVERSITY CRIME UNIT

Authorities later discovered 14 boxes containing more plants at the guest cottage where Cardona and Gonzalez were staying. In total, they had 2,248 plants, which they'd

Cape Province, estimated to be worth \$100,000.

The couple entered into a plea bargain agreement and were sentenced to 12 years imprisonment, which was suspended to five years with a further fine of \$150,000—the highest sentence ever handed down for flora crime in the Western Cape.



The Namaqua Dwarf Adder, seen here on a sand dune in Namaqualand, South Africa, is a vulnerable species highly prized by snake collectors.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FLPA, ALAMY

In an interview at his office near Cape Town, Paul Gildenhuis, head of the [CapeNature Biodiversity Crime Unit](#), explained that this case merely hints at the vast global exotic plant and animal trade and spoke about the challenges he faces in dealing with the smuggling problem.

What is biodiversity crime?

A lot of people think that biodiversity crime is only about elephants and rhinos, but it involves the illegal trade in all plants and animals. The trade is worth billions of dollars

It can involve anything from animal meat, to bones, plants, insects, reptiles, horns, and of course ivory.

What are some of the smaller species that are targeted?

We've basically reached the stage where everything that walks, creeps, crawls, and flies is collected. But the smaller species are easier to smuggle, so they're often targeted first. There's no limit on what could go. Some reptile species in South Africa—such as dwarf adders—are highly prized among collectors.

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Insects are a big trade—worth millions of dollars a year!

PAUL GILDENHUYS, HEAD OF THE CAPENATURE
BIODIVERSITY CRIME UNIT

In 2012, we caught poachers with a huge haul of tiger snakes, geckos, berg adders, house snakes, and horned adders. We also caught another group recently with 88,000 Protea flowers.

Tortoises, lizards, snakes, and plants are easy to put in bags or courier out of the country. Insects, for instance, can fit in your bag while you just walk through the airport.

Insects are a big trade—worth millions of dollars a year! Colophons, also known as Cape Stag Beetles, only occur in the mountains of the Western Cape Province and are highly sought after by collectors, who are willing to pay top dollar to have the beetles in their collection.

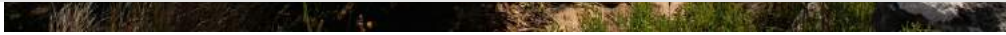
In 2004, we caught a group of beetle experts with 232 colophon beetles. They're world experts and had actually written a book on beetles of Europe and northern Africa. They even had a species named after them.

Who are these poachers, and why do they do it?

Broadly, the biodiversity poachers that we find fall into three categories: scientists or researchers; professional traders; and syndicates.

The scientists are often well educated, well equipped, and well resourced. I'm talking about professors and doctors in universities who have internationally acclaimed certificates for their contribution to conservation, and then we catch them doing this.





South Africa's Cape Floral Kingdom is a world biodiversity hot spot and home to a rich diversity of endemic species. Poachers and wildlife collectors come from all over the world to take its rare plants and animals.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE HUTCHINGS, REUTERS

We caught one doctor from Japan who specialized in dwarf aloes, poaching them in the Western Cape Province, and another doctor from Germany who was a world expert in orchids.

The professional pet traders collect to sell. That is their full-time job. These guys are like vacuum cleaners. It doesn't matter how big or small the lizard is, they'll take it because it's good money.

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BIODIVERSITY CRIME UNIT

They will travel to various international biodiversity hotspots like Australia, Mauritius, Madagascar, Brazil, and Indonesia. They usually go there for less than ten days—in and out. They're international smugglers. That's all they do.

The syndicate operators are like drug mules. They're paid a fee to come here, harvest, and then leave the country. They don't have specialized knowledge like the scientists and hobbyists. If they're caught, they're abandoned to their fate in the legal system.

Where are the plants and animals taken to?

They're sold in markets overseas—in Europe and Asia. That's where a majority of the stuff goes, and that's where the big buyers are. The poachers sell the plants and animals in trade markets or advertise the stuff online, where anybody can access it.

What more could be done on an international level to stop biodiversity crime? Does the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) assist your work?

Well, CITES only regulates for the import and export of wildlife between countries, so it doesn't have a direct role in law enforcement within a country.

But fortunately some of South Africa's provincial legislation is written in such a way that if you're in possession of a species listed as endangered or protected under CITES—or even if you bring such a species into the country from another country—and you don't have a permit, you can be charged accordingly.



The endangered Hoodia plant, seen here in South Africa's Tankwa Karoo National Park, is used as an appetite suppressant in popular weight-loss products. Illegal picking and smuggling of these plants is putting pressure on wild populations.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANN AND STEVE TOON, ALAMY

It's important that countries include CITES in their legislation so that the global movement of wildlife can be enforced anywhere.

What more could be done to combat biodiversity crime?


All law enforcement is something of an "arms race." The criminals develop a method, and law enforcement develops a counter-method, and so the cycle continues. Unfortunately, the criminals often have access to much better resources than do cash-strapped state agencies.

Partnerships are therefore essential for success in law enforcement. Without our partnerships with the police and

Partnerships with NGOs and the media are also essential in raising public awareness about biodiversity crime. Increased awareness leads to more information and tip-offs about criminal activity.

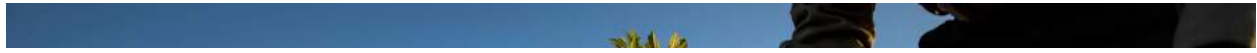
Many of our successes were as a result of members of the public who had been sensitized to biodiversity through our operations and media reports.

It all helps us in bringing these criminals to book.

Read more stories about wildlife crime and exploitation on [Wildlife Watch](#). Send tips, feedback, and story ideas to ngwildlife@natgeo.com. 



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