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National park restricted area: Concern about rare plants is great

In the Tsau //Khaeb National Park (restricted area) there are plants that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Scientist Antje Burke fears for the future of endemics. They could become extinct due to tourism, mining and plant poaching.

Wazon Guest Editor

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Dr. Antje Burke is concerned. Concerned about the endemic plants in Tsau //Khaeb National Park (restricted area). She has been active in the restricted area for almost 30 years and advises

Namdeb, the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism and other stakeholders in the region on biodiversity and nature conservation planning and environmental management.

"Plants are my passion," she said at the beginning of her lecture on Tuesday evening at the Namibia Scientific Society. They are always an indicator for other habitats. The restricted area is a national park with a very high diversity of plants and, above all, a large number of endemic specimens, i.e. plants that only occur in this region worldwide. "In total, there are 31 plant species that only occur in the restricted area, 11 of them with an extremely limited distribution area," explains the scientist. Sometimes they only grow on one of the mountains and nowhere else.

Multiple threats

"Do the endemics stand a chance in the face of multiple threats?" Burke deals with this question in detail. She presents a list of threats that endanger the plants in the restricted area and make their future uncertain. First, Burke mentions climate change, "we don't know how they're going to react to it." However, it is clear that they will be exposed to greater stress in the future. Mining also destroys habitats. However, it is thanks to diamond mining that this diversity was able to survive in the restricted area at all.

For some time now, part of the restricted area has also been open to the public. At the "Aurus Saddle" there is a hiking trail and a viewpoint for tourists. "Right there is a hotspot of rare plants," Burke complains. She had requested a path with demarcations and a viewing platform. She also recommends installing a surveillance camera so people know they'll be seen if they steal a plant. But none of that happened. Apparently there was a lack of money. "Everyone wants to take a picture, so don't stand in the way and step on the plants." If this continues, the endemic hotspot will be lost in a few years, predicts Burke. That is not sustainable tourism.

Plant poaching is also a serious problem. For Burke, she is one of the biggest threats. The endemics are sold in Asian markets to collectors or for medicinal purposes.

The last aspect Burke addresses is the "Green Hydrogen Project". Should wind farms spread in the future - plans are already underway - they would also hit areas that are home to very many endemic plants. One could then no longer speak of green development.

After the lecture it is quiet in the room, many faces are grim. The challenges facing restricted area plants in the future are troubling. "They would be lost if they were destroyed." To save them from extinction, Burke calls for more intensive environmental management and an increase in the ministry's staff. Burke concludes her presentation by saying, "Endemites only stand a chance if their status is recognized and measures to protect them are adopted and followed in planning, development and execution."