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ENDEMIC: Namibia is home to diverse endemic succulents. Photo: CONSERVATION NAMIBIA

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TRAFFICKING OF ENDEMIC NAMIBIAN SUCCULENTS SURGES

- **Namibian succulents under siege**

Twenty-two suspects were arrested last year, and two convictions were finalised as live plant trafficking escalated in Namibia.

Ellanie Smit

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Trafficking of live plants, particularly rare and endemic succulents and pachycauls, has exploded as an illegal trade threatening rare species in Namibia.

According to the Wildlife Protection and Law Enforcement in Namibia report for 2022, the first cases were only registered last year.

However, high volumes of live plants have already been seized and numerous suspects arrested.

The report indicated that 11 cases were registered last year and 22 suspects were arrested, with two convictions. The data includes only arrests related to live plants; arrests related to timber are currently not fully captured in the database.

"Namibia is home to diverse endemic succulents that appear to be particularly popular amongst international collectors, with the illicit trade fuelled via internet platforms."

Worrying impact

The impact of the trade is currently difficult to quantify but may be severe, especially on rare species with highly restricted ranges.

According to the report, the protection of indigenous and endemic succulents that are poached and trafficked to feed a global demand for ornamental plants is particularly challenging.

The plants occur at low densities in vast, arid landscapes, often outside protected areas.

"Sensitisation amongst all stakeholders to the sudden, massive threat posed by live-plant trafficking is an important initial step, while strengthening laws and closer alignment between plant conservation, protection and law-enforcement activities are vital."

Clearly, plant products are being illicitly harvested and trafficked in large volumes, which can have a rapid impact on plant populations, especially those of rare species with a localised distribution."

Timber crime persists

Meanwhile, the illegal exploitation of Namibia's timber resources continues to present significant challenges. Despite a 2018 moratorium on harvesting, illegal use continues, further depleting Namibia's already limited and heavily impacted timber resources as well as some non-timber forest resources, the report said.

It said that transboundary schemes targeting Namibian timber have been uncovered, a number of illicit shipments were seized, and cases related to the illegal cutting of trees in the charcoal industry were opened during 2022.

The report notes that forest legislation and regulations have been inadequate and poorly enforced, although the establishment of community forests has been an important development to empower rural communities to benefit from forest resources.

"In addition to illegal exploitation of timber in the country, Namibia has been identified as a major conduit for both legal and illegal timber consignments from Zambia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola to China via Walvis Bay clearing facilities and a truck route from Katima Mulilo.

A review of forestry legislation and regulations was undertaken in 2022 and represents the first step to improving plant laws.