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Native plants that were stripped and confiscated are now given new life at the National Botanical Garden in Windhoek. Photo Augetto Graig



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An *Adenia pechuelii* plant found in poachers' possession. Photo Augetto Graig



The national botanical gardens' curator, Leevi Nanyeni, urges Namibians to do their part to protect the country's native plants. Photo Augetto Graig



Native plants that were stripped and confiscated are now given new life at the National Botanical Garden in Windhoek. Photo Augetto Graig



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PLANT POACHING A DANGEROUS TREND

Augetto Graig

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The National Botanical Garden's curator, Leevi Nanyeni, appealed to Namibians to support the fight against the increasing poaching of native and vulnerable plants.

Namibia is home to some of the world's most unique plant species, all of which are categorized, cataloged and preserved at the National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI) in the capital.

Nanyeni expressed concern over the growing trend of plant poaching.

"Nowadays we have more and more to do with plant poaching. Here we rehabilitate some of what we get, or we find a suitable and safe place to plant them and look after them. Plant poaching has become a trend. I already know of up to ten registered cases of it - just between 2019 and 2023. The plants are removed and there are many cases, like with the *Adenia pechuelii*, where the plants can grow to a massive size. I have one case involving 164 of these plants," he elaborates.

"Our precious plants are being targeted and many are being taken out. Maybe they can be used for bonsais because they are so pretty, but that's just a theory, we're not sure. It's something that gives me sleepless nights. Those who are caught for this (poaching) must be publicly exposed on radio and television so that we can know who they are. The public involved must know and hear about the consequences behind these actions," he says.

The Ministry of the Environment, Forestry and Tourism also expressed concern about this trend

in August. The ministry's spokesperson, Romeo Muyunda, said at the time that stripped plants are increasingly being confiscated - with 22 arrests in this connection since 2022.

"It is clear that plant products are harvested illegally and traded in large volumes, which is a can have rapid impacts on plant populations, especially those of rare species with a localized distribution," he said.

According to Muyunda, Adenia, Conophytum, Lithops, Cyphostemma, Pachypodium and Commiphora are among the plant species targeted. Many of these plant species are vulnerable to extinction.

The environment ministry's 2022 report on wildlife protection and law enforcement in Namibia mentions an incident where Cyphostemma and Adenia specimens were smuggled by air cargo from Windhoek to Hong Kong with forged permits. Devil's claw is also often in the sights of smugglers and illegal crops that are hidden between legal crops and exported in this way are a challenge, according to the report.

"The global demand for ornamental plants has exploded in recent years, driven in part by the Internet allowing easy connection to markets around the world, while the risk of being apprehended is low," the report said. – augetto@republicin.com.na