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ENVIRONMENT (/OMGEWING)

TANZANIAN ACCUSED OF TRAFFICKING IN PLANTS

Three Namibians are co-accused

In the past two years, authorities have seized 666 native plants that have been stripped.

Tanya Bause

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Ellanie Smit - a Tanzanian citizen who is believed to be a mastermind in the trade of plants and her three Namibian co-accused will appear in the Opuwo Magistrate's Court on Thursday for the illegal harvesting of Elephant Foot. WINSKOPIES (HTTPS://SHOPPING.MY.NA/)

29-year-old Diana Mushiku from Tanzania, Veisiruajje Tjavora (25), Jenniter Simataa (37) and Tjivinda Unatavi (31) were arrested between October 21 and November 10 in Okonjombu in the Puros area of the Kunene region with 46 Adenia pechuelii -plants, better known as Elephant Foot, which they allegedly harvested without a permit. WHATSAPP (HTTPS://API.WHATSAPP.COM/SEND?PHONE=264811700010)

The four made their first court appearance on November 13, but a bail hearing did not take place and the case was adjourned. The spokesperson for the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, Romeo Muyunda, says the case is part of a rising trend of organized crime syndicates using local residents to illegally harvest Namibia's unique plant species.

QUERIES ▾ ()

"The case is one of many where international poaching syndicates use Namibian people to persuade local community members and harvest the plants for a small fee," he said.

Myunda says the plants are then smuggled across international borders to be sold to plant collectors for significant sums of money. According to him, in the past two years, authorities have seized 666 native plants, excluding illegal timber that has been stripped, in their effort to fight the new wave of nature crimes.

GOVERNMENT (/REGERING)

"A staggering 430 of the confiscated plants were Elephant Foot which led to 16 criminal cases and the arrest of 37 suspects."

Myunda said most of these arrests were the result of intelligence-led investigations led by the Blue Rhino Task Force, which consists of various branches of the police working with the department's investigative unit.

AGRICULTURAL (/LANDBOU)

"I would like to encourage the community members of the Khorixas, Sesfontein, Puros and Okondjombo areas where they are to be sold illegally to report any suspicious movement in their area to the authorities," said the head of the crime investigation department of the Kunene Region, Deputy Commissioner Paavo Iiyambo said. SUBSCRIPTION (HTTPS://NMH.MY.NA/MAIN/SUBSCRIBE)

COMPETITIONS (/KOMPETISIES)

"The arrest of Mashiku is therefore a major breakthrough for Namibian authorities who aim to disrupt organized crime syndicates." (https://www.facebook.com/republikein/)(https://twitter.com/republ

Mashiku was charged with breaching the Prevention of Organized Crime Act (POCA) and the Forestry Act. Violation of POCA carries heavy penalties, of fines of up to N\$1 billion and up to 100 years in prison, or both.

Her Namibian co-accused were charged with breaching the forestry act, which can result in fines of N\$8,000 or two years in prison, or both.

According to Myunda, the new threat after prolonged periods of drought is something that communities in the Kunene cannot handle.

"Out of desperation, some community members have accepted the risk of undertaking the illegal harvesting and transport of plants in exchange for the small change offered by the crime syndicates."

ELEPHANT'S FOOT

The future of the slow-growing Elephant's Foot remains in the balance.

"This oddly shaped dwarf tree earns its name by growing almost as wide as it is tall. It only occurs in rocky areas of northwestern Namibia and southwestern Angola."

Myunda said the interesting tree is unfortunately in high demand among international plant collectors.

*Since plants grown in nurseries do not grow in the same way as their wild counterparts, almost all Elephant Foot plants found in international trade have been harvested from the wild."

WINKOPIES (HTTPS://SHOPPING.MY.NA/)

He said all confiscated plants are sent to the National Botanical Garden for care, rehabilitation and later to be planted back in the wild. The garden is managed by the Botanical Research Institute (NBRI). However, the replanting process is difficult, expensive and many plants are likely to die due to the damage done when they were harvested.

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"MEFT takes these crimes against our people and biodiversity very seriously," warned Teofilus Nghitila, executive director of the ministry.

E-ISSUES ▾ ()

"These criminals will not stop until our plants are all gone. We simply cannot allow this, so I am asking all our officials across the country to be ready to catch perpetrators." - republikein@republikein.com.na

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