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# Africa Succulent Elephant's Foot Poached for Smuggling to China in Crates for Toys

By Rich Co May 30, 2023 12:40 AM EDT

Elephant's Foot, a sort of succulent that may be found in Africa, were poached and smuggled in toy shipping containers bound for China.

# **Elephant's Foot: Smuggled to China**

Recently, shipments of children's toys labeled "Made in China" were strangely returned to China, which piqued the suspicion of South African customs officers.

Upon closer inspection, it was discovered that the packages were actually stuffed with stolen goods rather than toys at all.

Chinese criminal organizations-often the same ones that have already developed smuggling channels in South Africa for illegal abalone or rhinoceros horns-have now shifted their focus to trafficking in elephant feet.

# **Succulent from Africa Called Elephant's Foot**

Elephant's foot is a species of succulent that grows in arid regions like South Africa's vast Karoo.

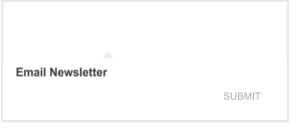
Its greyish wrinkled bulb remarkably resembles a pachyderm's pad.

The species is a long-lived, slow-growing succulent with aboveground tubers that are covered in layers of corky bark.

In nature, the caudex can reach a height of up to six eet, like an elephant's foot. Stems elongate in a climbing manner. Heartshaped leaves are present.

Because flowers are dioecious, male and female blooms can only grow on distinct plants.

They often develop in the winter and are a light greenish-yellow color. Male flowers have spiny racemes that are upright. Spinescent, spreading spikes contain female flowers, according to World of Succulents.



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The rare plants, some of which are as much as a century old and can be found only on a single rocky outcrop, are being removed from the wild at alarming rates, according to scientists, and many are now on the verge of extinction.

### 1.5 Million Succulents

The Succulent Karoo ecosystem, famous for its distinctive biodiversity, extends from Namibia to the Western Cape of South Africa.

Ismail Ebrahim of SANBI noted the region's unique plants, which are part of South Africa's heritage and are found nowhere else.

But some species, especially conophytums alongside other succulents, are in danger of going extinct.

In the last three years, 1.5 million South African succulents have reportedly been taken from the wild, according to <u>SANBI</u>.

Succulents saw a rise in popularity as a result of the pandemicinduced lockdown, as social media influencers promoted their decorative worth.

Over 242,000 succulent plants were seized by law enforcement in 2022 alone due to the growth of the illegal succulent trade.

The South African government has created a national action plan to tackle this trade.

## Smuggling Problem

Paul Gildenhuys, an enforcement specialist for CapeNature, has been battling criminal organizations that traffic in succulents illegally.

Without a permit, it is against the law in South Africa to collect or export succulents, and doing so carries fines or jail time.

The most severe punishment for poaching endangered plants is a 400,000 rand fine or a 10-year prison sentence.

Over 90 arrests, largely of those found smuggling plants in cars on highways, have been made as a result of informants.

However, prosecutions that target lower-level members of trafficking organizations-locals who labor for global gangs who extract the plants-frequently result in meager fines and suspended sentences.

Due to the high rates of poverty and unemployment in the area, succulent poaching continues to be appealing despite the modest earnings.

Poached plants are often shipped via numerous channels, including the OR Tambo Airport in Johannesburg, mail, or couriers, to China or Hong Kong.

To deter the lucrative activity, officials avoided giving precise dollar amounts, but they did acknowledge the large profits produced by foreign-run smuggling networks.

China controls the market, despite some illicit commerce with the US and the EU. 98.7% of the roughly 400,000 plants confiscated in the Western Cape between 2019 and 2022 were headed for China.

Houseplants are frequently the only source of greenery in high-rise buildings, and this lack of greenery contributes to the desire for decorative things from China's expanding urban middle class.

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## **Social Media and Succulent Trade**

Carl Brown, a CapeNature enforcer, admitted that the issue doesn't elicit as strong a response as rhino poaching, but purchasers might not be aware that the plants they bought were smuggled out of South Africa.

But he stressed the disastrous effects of the trade, pointing out that a tiny plant being smuggled into China might be 150 years old and was supposed to be performing a significant ecological role.

The demand is influenced by the range of succulent plants for sale on websites such as Etsy, eBay, and some Chinese social media sites in addition to the translation of scientific literature on succulents into Mandarin.

The Chinese Embassy in Pretoria responded when questioned about measures to solve the issue by saying that China and South Africa have been working together to combat such crimes by exchanging information, exchanging evidence, and conducting arrests.

Additionally, the embassy noted that Chinese diplomatic missions in South Africa have regularly warned Chinese nationals and visitors not to gather wild plants carelessly, <u>VOA News</u> reports.

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Tags Africa, succulent, elephant's foot, illegal poaching, smuggling, china, Crates, toys, indoor plants

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