



## South Africa: How To Stop Succulent Poaching and Trafficking in its Tracks #AfricaClimateHope

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Succulent plant

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INTERVIEW *By Melody Chironda*

Succulent poaching, fuelled by the illicit trade it sustains, is emerging as a pressing global concern, threatening the existence of these remarkable plants. The increasing demand fuels a lucrative illicit market, endangering their existence in the wild. The climate crisis and

the destruction of natural habitats further exacerbate the challenges faced by these unique plants.

[Succulents, known for their ability to store water in their leaves and stems](#), are highly sought after for their aesthetic appeal and rarity. But if the rate of widespread poaching persists, there is a high likelihood that these species will eventually become extinct in their natural habitats.

The South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) reports that [South Africa](#) has witnessed a significant increase in instances of illegal succulents trafficking. This illicit activity is driven by the growing global demand for these collectable plants, particularly in emerging markets across Asia. In December 2022, more than 414,000 illegally harvested plants were confiscated, and there is a high likelihood that more species will go extinct if poaching continues.

[GroundUp](#) reported that SANBI estimates that more than 1.5 million of these dwarf succulents were removed from the wild over the past three years. Many of these plants are red-listed, meaning that they appear on the [International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species](#).

The proliferation of social media platforms created an easy way for marketing succulent plants, leading to a surge in illegal trade. This trend poses a heightened threat to hundreds of species, rendering them more vulnerable to the risk of extinction.

**Yet, amid this grim reality, a glimmer of hope arises from the minds and hearts of dedicated individuals and organisations - a collaborative and multi-faceted approach involving governments, non-profit organisations, local communities, and public awareness campaigns**

South Africa's government conservation agencies, local residents, government departments, and NGO partners launched a [National Response Strategy and Action Plan](#) to address the illegal trade in the country's succulent flora. The strategy aims to protect the country's plants while promoting sustainable development. It focuses on addressing illegal harvesting through collaboration and outlines specific actions to achieve conservation objectives. By working together and implementing comprehensive strategies, succulents are protected from exploitation, and their habitats preserved for their long-term survival. According to the plan, governments, non-profit organisations, and local communities play vital roles in addressing the issue of succulent poaching and funding for succulent trafficking. Governments are responsible for enacting and enforcing laws and regulations to protect succulents, and collaborating with other countries to stop international smuggling as well as training customs officers to identify and detect illegal shipments.

While non-profit organisations focus on environmental conservation, such as botanical gardens, conservation societies, and wildlife protection groups, and work to raise awareness about succulent poaching and its impact. They conduct research, support habitat restoration, and collaborate with local communities to protect succulent species.

It also says that engaging local communities living near succulent habitats is crucial, and providing alternative livelihoods such as sustainable farming or eco-tourism initiatives can reduce the economic incentives for succulent poaching. Raising public awareness is another key aspect, achieved through educational campaigns, workshops, and media outreach. These efforts inform the public, discourage the demand for illegally sourced succulents, and promote responsible plant cultivation and trade.

Dr. Carina Bruwer, senior researcher for Southern Africa at [ENACT Africa](#), a project implemented by the Institute for Security Studies in partnership with INTERPOL and the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, shed light on addressing the issue of succulent poaching. Bruwer has a research background in transnational organised crime, with a special interest in environmental and maritime crimes. She previously worked for the Endangered Wildlife Trust and the United Nations Global Maritime Crime Programme.

**As a senior researcher for Southern Africa at ENACT Africa, what is your specific role in addressing the issue of succulent poaching and funding for succulent trafficking?**

There is a National Strategy and Action Plan to address the illegal succulent [market](#). I have focused on researching the multi-stakeholder response to the illegal market by speaking to stakeholders implementing the strategy. Being cognisant of the transnational nature of the illegal market, I try to understand how the response can address the market in its entirety. Transnational criminal networks have to be countered in an equally transnational and networked way - there is no alternative if the response is to succeed. By speaking to stakeholders we hope to make some recommendations and bring attention to the need for cooperation and sufficient resources to counter what is currently a significant illegal market robbing South Africa of endemic species. If they go extinct here, they are lost to the entire world and we'll only ever see them on display outside of their habitat.

**Can you provide insights into the financial networks and illicit markets that facilitate the trade of trafficked succulents? How do these networks operate across borders?**

The assumption is that specialist plant collectors are driving illegal harvesting since they often want plants that are not available from nurseries - such as very big plants, which by default would have to be very old. It could also be that demand from more generalist consumers exceeds supply, triggering illegal harvesting. Such consumers may not even know that they are buying an illegally harvested plant.

The criminal networks running the illegal market are also involved in trafficking other illegal commodities like abalone and ivory. This means that they have the existing networks, expertise, and supply chains needed to move plants out of South Africa, either through airports or seaports, and across South Africa's borders to neighbouring countries to be exported from there. With regards to network structure - the majority of harvesters and or transporters are locals, mostly from communities in the Succulent Karoo. Many people in the arid region are unemployed and there is therefore a large potential pool of people who are willing to scour the veld for plants. The harvesters channel plants to Chinese middlemen often based in the Cape Town area, who are responsible for orchestrating exports to markets abroad since demand is situated overseas and not in South Africa. Plants appear to be leaving mostly from OR Tambo, but they are also moved by sea, and through neighbouring countries. What we don't know enough about yet is who are the people abroad, especially in Asia, that are commissioning the harvesting, and that are selling them to the end user. These are the people that law enforcement needs to focus on, but we can only do this by cooperating with international counterparts.

**Are there any identifiable patterns or trends in the funding side of succulent trafficking? For instance, are there specific regions, countries, or organisations that play a significant role in financing these activities?**

The assumption is that the majority of collectors are based in Asia, but the market for South African species also extends to Europe, the U.S., and other countries. Some buyers are reportedly also based in eastern African countries.

With regards to funding specifically, criminal networks likely fund their operations from profits made from succulents, as well as these other illegal trades as mentioned. With regards to how profits made from plants are laundered, these kinds of networks often deal in cash, they might also barter plants for other commodities like drugs as we've seen with the illegal abalone market, or they could be laundering funds through shell companies or legitimate businesses like nurseries. The guys harvesting the plants however make a fraction of what the more senior network members are making. These foot soldiers are likely paid in cash. We are still learning about the financial side of things ...

**What are the economic motivations driving individuals or criminal networks to engage in succulent trafficking? Are there specific factors that make succulents particularly attractive from a financial perspective?**

You have to distinguish between the different network members. The more senior people are doing it purely for profit, they run businesses like any other, but they do so in violation of laws and by exploiting precious natural resources that belong to South Africa in order to sell them to people who are willing to pay attractive prices abroad. The harvesters are however doing it for a meagre income. They often are unemployed and so any money made from plants is better than nothing. They might also feel that it is okay to harvest plants because it doesn't hurt people or animals - but they don't understand that it in fact impacts the entire ecosystem. It also robs South Africa of something that is only found here. If harvesters could have alternative income sources, perhaps benefiting from the region's unique plants in a legal way, they would hopefully reconsider harvesting.

**How does the funding side of succulent trafficking intersect with other illicit activities, such as organised crime, money laundering, or corruption? Are there any links between the proceeds from succulent trafficking and other criminal enterprises?**

South Africa's succulents weren't always being harvested and traded in the organised manner that we are seeing now. But due to the perceived lucrative nature of the illegal market, criminal networks already trading in other wildlife commodities seized the opportunity to run the trade. With regards to money laundering - it's a given when it comes to organised crimes since the very aim of organised crime is making a profit - and keeping those profits hidden so that the business can continue to run ... But definitely, corruption and transnational organised crime (TOC) go hand in hand. Corruption typically acts as a facilitator, so you could have corrupt policemen or customs officials turning a blind eye or tipping off networks in return for a percentage of profits. This is not unique to succulents, to South Africa, or to wildlife crime, The more important question is - what is being done to address this corruption?

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**In your opinion, what are the key barriers or challenges in identifying and following the money trail in succulent trafficking? How can these obstacles be overcome to enhance investigations and prosecutions related to the financing of this illicit trade?**

Again, this is more of a question for law enforcement and financial investigators.

Unfortunately, criminal networks are experts at obscuring their illegal activities. And they are better resourced than the law enforcement entities pursuing them. But I think one key thing is because these networks operate internationally and the large sums of money are mostly realised abroad - we would have to rely on international cooperation to understand and address the entire supply chain - including following the financial processes that these networks use. And this is best left to specialised investigators trained in financial investigations. Prosecuting more senior network members rather than hammering illegal harvesters is also key so that the networks are forced to stop their operations. Seizing their assets as the proceeds of crime is also crucial, as this makes it harder to do business.

**How can financial institutions and law enforcement agencies collaborate more effectively to detect and disrupt the financial flows associated with succulent trafficking? Are there any innovative approaches or best practices that have shown promise in addressing this issue?**

Legitimate businesses and institutions like banks need to safeguard themselves against being used for illicit means, and they have to report suspicious transactions or activity.

Overall, it has to be addressed as the organised crime that it is. Unfortunately, organised crimes across the globe persist because we haven't quite figured out how to mitigate them to the extent that their illicit business model fails because they're simply not making a profit. We do however know that it will take a multi-stakeholder private-public partnership if we have any hope of countering the illegal market, as is illustrated in the National Strategy and Action Plan.

It is not up to only law enforcement or private industry or banks or NGOs or government - everyone has a role to play, but they have to do it collectively. Because the succulent trafficking networks have people across the country, every province, relevant role players investigating the criminal market have to share information with their counterparts. The problem is - when we talk about the money, it means that the plants have already been removed from the wild. And our number one priority has to be to protect them from being harvested in the first place.