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## Dogs quickly sniff out succulent thugs



Henry Walsh | 6 Oct 2023

Global demand for collectible succulents has increased drastically over the past few years. This means that thousands of endangered plant species are illegally removed from their natural habitat by poachers and sold to meet the insatiable demand for them.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) has now started a project to train three dogs and use their strong sense of smell to sniff out the succulent poachers.

South Africa's succulent Karoo biome, which stretches from Southern Namibia to the Northern and Western Cape, is home to several sought-after plant species and the region is keenly targeted by plant poachers.

Dr. Carina Becker-du Toit, the scientific coordinator for plant poaching response, says that by the end of June this year, more than one million plants that had been harvested illegally in South Africa had been seized.

"This is equivalent to approximately 3 000 to 6 000 plants per week, most of which come from the Northern Cape's Namaqualand region.

"However, experts suspect that less than 25% of the illegal trade in endangered succulent plant species is intercepted by law enforcement officers, which means that over 1.5 million plants have been illegally removed from their natural habitat and traded in the past three years."



Becker-du Toit believes that approximately 650 native and endemic plant groups – many of which are endangered – are affected by this.

Different types of succulents (incl *Mesembryanthemum* and koudeks) as well as geophytes (bulb species) in South Africa are sought after due to their attractive qualities and rarity.

"The button, which belongs to the genus *Conophytum* and the fig family *Aizoacea*, is particularly affected by this, pushing most of the species in this genus to critically endangered levels."

Becker-du Toit believes that the challenge with the illegal harvesting and trade of succulents is one of the biggest biodiversity challenges currently being faced by the country.

"The succulent Karoo is an international biodiversity hotspot and South Africa has a key responsibility to protect this biodiversity – which is found nowhere else in the world." In July 2021, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) with support from the South African National Biodiversity Institute (Sanbi) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in South Africa, together with a diverse network of government departments, conservation authorities, NGOs and local communities are beginning to formulate plans to curb this problem.

“By February last year, the national response strategy and action plan was developed which was approved by the ministers and members of the executive council meeting (Minmec) for implementation.

“Sanbi is one of the main players in the implementation of the response plan and works closely with law enforcement to identify confiscated plants and other critical information needed for criminal investigations.”

It is during the same period that the EWT launched a project to train three dogs to sniff out succulents.



This project fitted perfectly with the objectives of the national strategy and provides one of the potential tools in the toolkit to help combat the poaching problem. Becker-du Toit facilitates the cooperation of the groups consisting of the EWT, police, CapeNature and Sanbi.

“The collaboration of these four organizations has enabled the deployment of the EWT canine unit to detect succulents at key locations.

“This is a first for South Africa and as far as we know, these dogs are the only sniffer dogs in the world that are specifically used to help combat plant poaching.”





The dog handlers, Shadi Henrico and Esther Matthew, say they are extremely pleased with how well the dogs are performing.

“The use of sniffer dogs has great potential to help protect our country’s biodiversity. The dogs are currently being deployed across the Western and Northern Cape provinces at strategic locations as part of a pilot study to determine their effectiveness,” says Henrico.

Becker-du Toit says this is an exciting project that shows very promising results.

“This is a first for South Africa and it is a wonderful learning opportunity for all involved.”

The EWT’s succulent detection project is funded by The Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, with operational support provided by CapeNature, Sanbi and the police.

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