

ISS TODAY OP-ED

SA battling to protect precious succulents from blooming illegal trade



Conophytum ficiforme found in the Western Cape, South Africa. (Photo: Mike Keeling/Flickr)



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New research shows that strides have been made, but more support and private-public partnerships are needed.

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As two collectors walk down the South Korean nursery's humid aisles, they spot a magnificent specimen. Having collected South African succulents for over two decades, their greenhouse showcases many plants growing in what looks like their natural Succulent Karoo habitat. But they have never seen this species before, and judging from its size, the plant looks decades old.

The nursery owner tells them the succulent is a new mother plant used for cultivation and is not for sale. But if they wanted an equally large plant, he could connect them to his broker. Two weeks later, their 110-year-old plant arrives by courier from Cape Town. It is the last of only two centenarians left in the wild.

South Africa's Succulent Karoo is home to weird and wonderful flora that occur only in this small, arid part of the Earth. Many species are so tiny they are hard to spot with the naked eye. Some produce beautiful flowers or look like they belong in a sci-fi film. Others are so rare only a few people have seen them. These unique qualities make them sought after in the international horticultural market.

While South African nurseries artificially propagate Succulent Karoo species for sale in Asia, Europe, the United States and elsewhere, foreign large-scale outlets supply the greatest market share. Yet despite this legal supply, some species are illegally removed from the wild, especially in the Northern and Western Cape provinces.



Succulent Karoo hotspot, southern Africa. (Source: Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund)

Opportunistic harvesting dates back decades, but recently the illegal succulent market has become organised, run by networks trading in other illicit [commodities](#) like abalone, rhino horn and drugs. Because species now risk becoming extinct and the illegal trade impacts biodiversity, livelihoods and the economy, stakeholders swiftly developed a national [strategy](#) and action plan against unlawful trading in succulent flora.

Since the strategy's 2022 launch, many strides have been made, with state and non-government actors working together to implement it. Standard operating procedures have been created to care for seized plants, and local prosecutors and presiding officers have been made aware of the illegal market and its impacts.

At-risk species have been [listed](#) in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna. Other efforts include engaging communities on how to counter the illegal market, deploying more staff, and training law enforcement and border entities in plant-related matters.

But the vast expanse over which these plants occur, rampant illegal harvesting of multiple species, transnational nature of the market, and a shortage of resources leave responders between a rock and a hard place.

Private-public partnerships crucial

Enact organised crime researchers asked those implementing the strategy's seven objectives to identify their greatest challenges and opportunities. The [study](#) found that cooperation between state and non-state actors was vital to success — showing the importance of addressing wildlife crime through private-public partnerships. It also revealed the impact on the legal market, as nursery owners reported declining orders for species targeted for the international illicit market.

South Africa's National Integrated Strategy to Combat Wildlife Trafficking [notes](#) the importance of addressing these offences as transnational organised crime. And yet the country's response is primarily focused within its borders. While there are encouraging efforts to engage with international counterparts, more such measures are needed to target the entire illegal market.

Although the strategy against wildlife trafficking focuses on law enforcement and security, the plan to stop illegal succulent trading tackles the problem holistically. It seeks to address the socio-economic conditions giving rise to the illicit market and explores ways to create a formal succulent economy in the Succulent Karoo.

Not only are wild populations dwindling, but seized plants have become unmanageable due to a lack of infrastructure and staff to care for them. Responders, including police, provincial environmental departments and non-governmental organisations are overwhelmed by a lack of resources and staff. Interviewees told Enact that due to police shortages and allegations of corruption, especially in the Northern Cape, the response was primarily driven by Western Cape stakeholders.

The research found that South Africa's national and provincial environmental laws are ill-aligned. This hampers law enforcement and legal trade, and doesn't adequately protect at-risk species. And despite its multiple dimensions, few government departments are implementing the national strategy against illegal succulent trading — which weakens its impact.

Addressing the challenges

There are several ways to deal with these challenges. National and provincial governments should allocate resources and staff, and private funding sources should be explored for the strategy's implementation.

Prevention and protection are vital to keeping wild plants in the ground, since reactive policing results in thousands of seized plants needing care. Long-term cooperation between the environment, social development, tourism and trade departments should be encouraged to address the socio-economic drivers of the illicit trade.

Those allegedly involved in corruption should be investigated to re-establish trust between stakeholders. National and provincial legislation must be harmonised to protect at-risk succulents nationally and not just in the provinces where they occur.

The transnational aspects of the illegal succulent market should be researched to enable the dismantling of the international criminal value chain. Cooperation with other countries implicated in these organised crime markets should also be increased.

The entire transnational network must be taken on by an equally strong multisectoral network of public and private actors. The network's main task must be to safeguard wild plants from harvesting through monitoring and law enforcement, and especially by educating people and incentivising them to protect succulents.

Demand, harvesting and criminal networks will only be mitigated by a well-resourced, harmonised response between multiple government departments, non-governmental organisations, local communities, international counterparts and the private sector. **DM**

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The full Enact report and an Afrikaans summary can be downloaded [here](#).

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