

Spotlight on Agriculture

Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Rural Development • Directorate of Agricultural Research and Training • Private Bag 13184 • Windhoek

No 46 July 2001

SAVING OUR FUTURE A RED DATA LIST OF PLANTS

Plants are the basis of life. They produce all the oxygen we breathe and all our food produced on land comes from plants, directly or indirectly. Unfortunately many plant species are being lost due to human activities. If we want to save our future, we have to save our plants.

WHAT IS A "RED DATA LIST"?

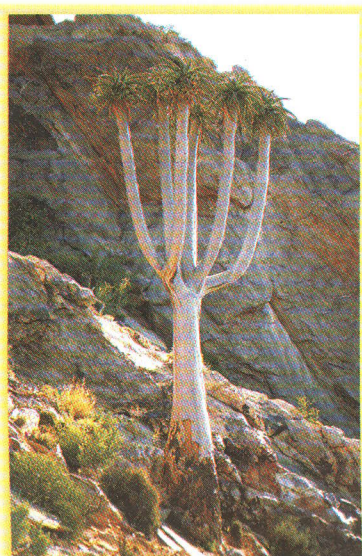
A Red Data List identifies those species that are at risk of going extinct. It also tells us which plants are the most threatened and why. Red Data Lists are used by conservationists, researchers and policy makers all over the world to develop management and recovery plans, habitat restoration efforts, general scientific research and conservation priorities.

THE ROLE OF THE NBRI

The 1997 IUCN Red List of Threatened Plants contains the names of more than 34000 plants from all over the world that range from extinct to not threatened. This list, however, does not contain all the names of threatened species in Namibia and local experts were not involved in this effort. Therefore, under the auspices of the National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI), a more comprehensive list of threatened plants for Namibia will be compiled by the end of 2002. Red Data Lists are also available for birds and other animals in Namibia.

THE ROLE OF SABONET

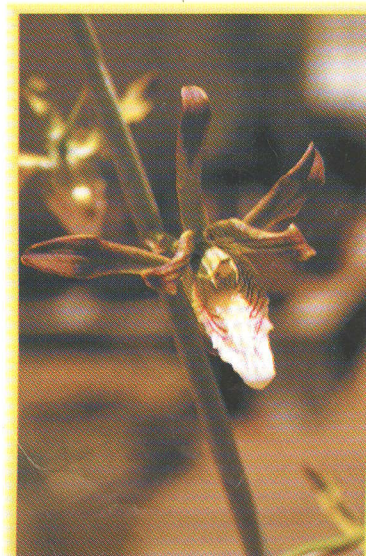
The Southern African Botanical Diversity Network (SABONET) is a network of southern African botanical institutions. One of its core initiatives is the Southern African Plant Red Data List Project which aims to produce the first ever comprehensive account (Red Data List) of the southern African region's flora that is threatened with extinction.



Aloe pillansii has a very restricted distribution and may be threatened by mining. (Photo H. Dauth)



Pterocarpus angolensis is declining because of logging, timber and wood carving. (Photo B. Curtis)



Eulophia leachii could be threatened by pesticides. (Photo C. Hines)

THE ROLE OF IUCN

The main objective is to publish Red Data Lists for the ten SABONET member countries in accordance with the guidelines set by the World Conservation Union's Species Survival Commission (IUCN-SSC) and to establish a network of southern African threatened plant professionals.

HOW IS A RED DATA LIST COMPILED?

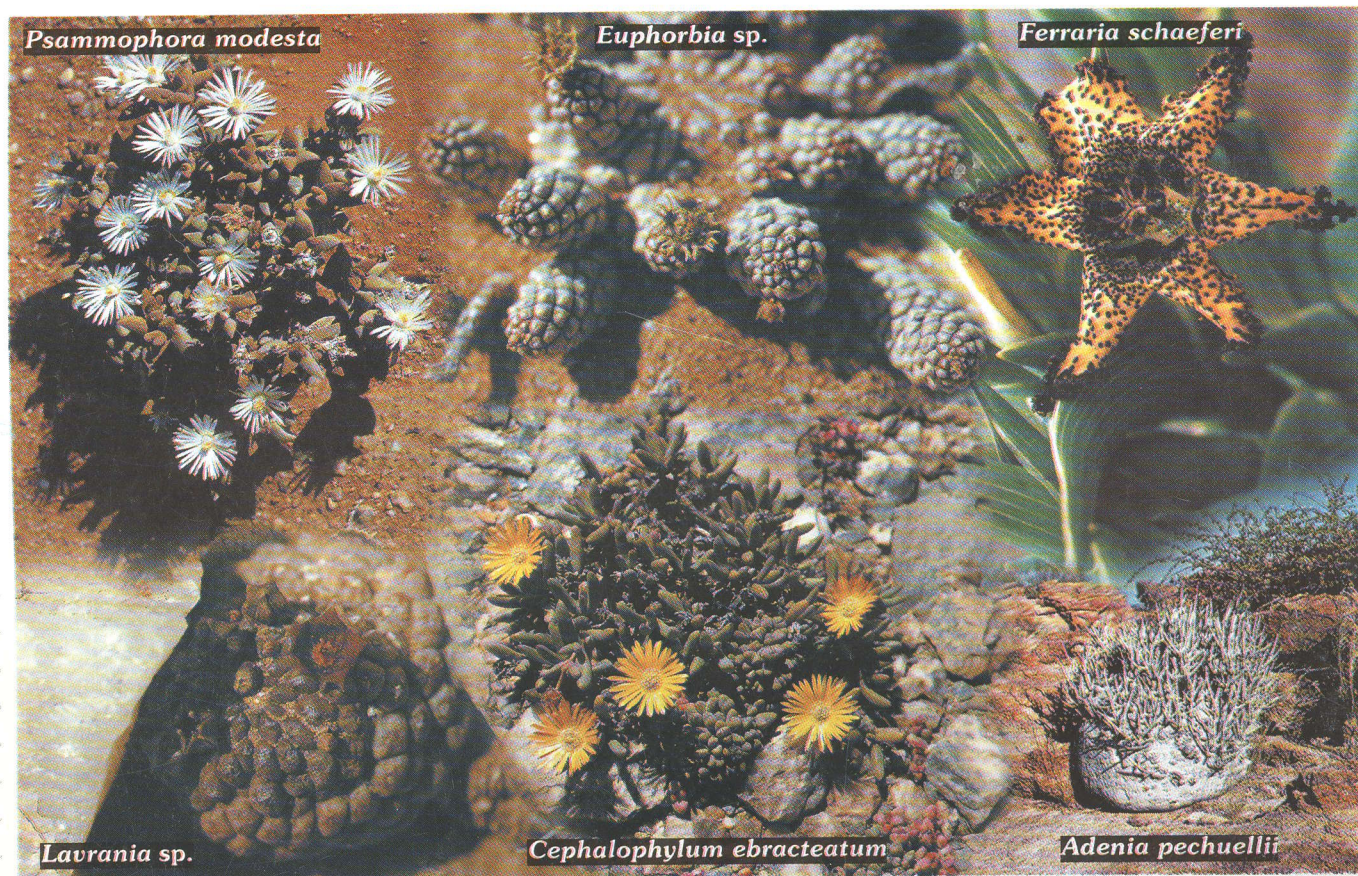
Information is collected from the field, literature and herbarium specimens and then carefully analysed to determine the conservation status of a species. Assessors normally try to answer the following questions:

- Is the size of the population becoming smaller and how fast?
- How big is the distribution area of the species as a whole?
- How many mature individuals that are capable of reproduction are left in the wild?
- Are all the individuals in the species in one population or are there more populations elsewhere?
- Which factors are threatening the survival of the species?

WHEN ARE SPECIES CONSIDERED TO BE THREATENED?

Some species only occur in a small area and if their habitat is degraded, the species may disappear. Other species have only a small number of mature plants that are capable of reproducing and if these plants die, the species may go extinct. Some species were once very abundant and had a wide distribution, but their numbers have been so heavily depleted that they are becoming endangered. Many timber species and medicinal plants fall into this category.

Many of the plants that are identified by Red Data Lists as threatened with extinction have agricultural potential and are economically and socially important. By letting our plants go extinct we are effectively causing our own extinction. Let's rather contribute to the quality of our future by saving our plants!



Many interesting and unusual species must still be assessed (Photos: M. Müller, G. Owen-Smith, C. Mannheimer)

Anyone who feels that he or she has a contribution to make towards this project, may contact the author.