

# Plant poaching on a steep incline

Namibia's succulents are being poached at levels that could quickly wipe out entire species, and that for a global ornamental plant market largely unaware of the damage being caused.

According to the Namibia National Wildlife Protection and Law Enforcement Report for 2024, live-plant trafficking poses a massive threat to Namibian succulents and pachycauls. Large numbers of live plants were once again seized in 2024, although the number of arrests and seizures was lower than in 2023.

The report noted that, while the exact number of consignments evading detection is unknown, preliminary research suggests the figure is substantial.

Seizure records show that elephant's foot (*Adenia pechuelii*) was the most-targeted species in 2023, with 326 plants confiscated. In 2024, the focus shifted to kobas (*Cyphostemma*), with a total of 465 plants seized.

"All these plants are slow-growing and sparsely distributed in localised ranges, and are classified as endemic or near-endemic to Namibia," the report stated.

In total, seven plant-related cases were registered in 2024, leading to 13 arrests and the seizure of 700 plant products, including live plants, timber, and devil's claw derivatives.

## Targeted for exploitation

The report further noted that all species of indigenous fauna and flora with financial or subsistence value are being targeted, either for illicit profit or to provide resources for impoverished communities.

"The protection of Namibia's biodiversity against crime and other human pressures is becoming increasingly difficult, as the combined impacts of legal use, illegal exploitation, and accidental destruction continue to grow."

Protecting Namibia's endemic succulents from the rising tide of live-plant poaching has therefore emerged as an urgent - and complex - conservation priority.

According to the report, strategies to safeguard these rare and localised plants are still in their infancy. Efforts in 2024 focused largely on awareness campaigns, monitoring, and replanting confiscated specimens into their natural habitats, rather than on in situ protection.

It added that dedicated plant rangers may prove effective in some regions.

## 'Plant blindness'

However, the report also pointed to a persistent challenge: a widespread lack of understanding of the seriousness of plant poaching among law enforcement and the judiciary.

"A high degree of 'plant blindness' remains a significant obstacle in court cases involving the trafficking of indigenous and endemic Namibian succulents, which are smuggled as live plants to feed the booming global ornamental plant trade."

It warned that current sentencing “bears little relation” to either the value of the plants trafficked or the severity of the crime’s impact on Namibia’s unique biodiversity.

The report calls for an urgent review of existing forestry legislation, along with judicial sensitisation to the impacts of live-plant trafficking.

“Despite its obvious consequences, combating plant trafficking presents unique challenges. Unlike iconic wildlife species, plants often go unnoticed – a phenomenon known as ‘plant blindness’. To counter this, Namibia has begun actively raising awareness among stakeholders.”

The report concludes that large-scale seizures over the past three years have revealed alarming insights into the extent of the illegal trade and its consequences.

Preliminary findings from a recent analysis suggest that, when considering the volume of plants trafficked, the social media activity of trafficking syndicates, and the number of illegally issued permits, the financial scale of the succulent trade could rival or even exceed that of rhino horn trafficking.