

Conviction reveals criminal syndicates' shifting focus in illegal plant trade



The conviction of four people in the Northern Cape for the illegal poaching of the miracle bush lily reveals that criminal syndicates are targeting a wider array of South Africa's unique flora for international markets.

The Calvinia Regional Court in the Northern Cape has convicted four foreign nationals for poaching 303 *Clivia mirabilis*, more commonly known as the miracle bush lily or the Oorlogskloof bush lily, worth an estimated retail value of between R6-million and R30-million.

On 3 July 2025, the four accused were each sentenced to 15 years of direct imprisonment for the illegal harvesting of this rare and critically endangered plant species, contravening conservation laws and violating South Africa's immigration legislation.





The poached Clivia mirabilis. This is a rare, slow-growing plant endemic to a limited area in the Western and Northern Cape, and is prized by poachers. (Photo: JP le Roux)

This all stemmed from an incident on 20 April 2024 when Mark Daddy (43), Raphael Mhashu (25), Simbarashe Charanelura (33) and Elton Ngwanati (34), were initially arrested for unlawful activities in the Oorlogskloof Nature Reserve near Nieuwoudtville in the Northern Cape.

“This is a strong warning to those who intend exploiting and damaging the environment, causing harm to the endangered plants,” SAPS Namakwa District Commissioner, Brigadier Schalk Andrews, said in a statement.

The *Clivia mirabilis* is a rare and critically endangered plant species, currently facing a high risk of extinction. It is extremely localised and endemic to a small area in the Northern Cape and Western Cape. It is difficult to keep alive outside its natural habitat.

It’s described as a perennial herb with strap-shaped leaves and thick, fleshy roots that can reach up to a metre in height when in full bloom with orange to salmon-pink trumpet-shaped flowers.

Mojalefa Senokoatsane, NPA spokesperson for the Northern Cape Division, said the men illegally entered the nature reserve and harvested 303 *Clivia mirabilis* specimens.

“Rangers spotted the accused in the reserve and immediately alerted the police. A swift joint operation between law enforcement and reserve staff led to the arrest of the suspects, who were found in possession of five large bags containing the endangered plants and tools used to uproot them. All four pleaded not guilty,” said Senokoatsane.



On 3 July 2025, four foreign nationals aged between 25 and 43 were convicted of poaching 303 protected succulents worth an estimated street value of R33,000. They were arrested for the offence on 20 April 2024. (Photo: JP le Roux)

Senokoatsane said that during the trial, four witnesses testified, including an expert who confirmed the identity, rarity and high value of *Clivia mirabilis*. The court also heard that illegal poaching of this species posed a significant threat to biodiversity.

In aggravation of sentence, the NPA said that regional court prosecutor Darryl Bromkamp had made the case of severe ecological damage caused by environmental crimes and the urgent need to deter similar offences.

Bromkamp urged the court to impose a strong sentence to affirm the importance of protecting South Africa's environmental heritage.

"This sentence sends a strong message that environmental crimes will not be tolerated. It affirms the commitment of the NPA and the broader criminal justice system to preserving South Africa's biodiversity and upholding the rule of law.

"It also reflects the growing prioritisation of environmental crimes within the broader fight against organised and transnational criminal networks," said Senokoatsane.

A relentless wave of plant poaching

This case is just the tip of the iceberg in a crisis threatening the survival of species such as *Clivia mirabilis* in a relentless wave of poaching events, driven by high demand from international collectors and largely sold in Asian markets.

This is according to a case study compiled by JP Le Roux, a biodiversity officer in the Northern Cape's Department of Agriculture, Environmental Affairs, Rural Development and Land Reform (DAERL) and submitted to the NPA as supporting documentation for the case.

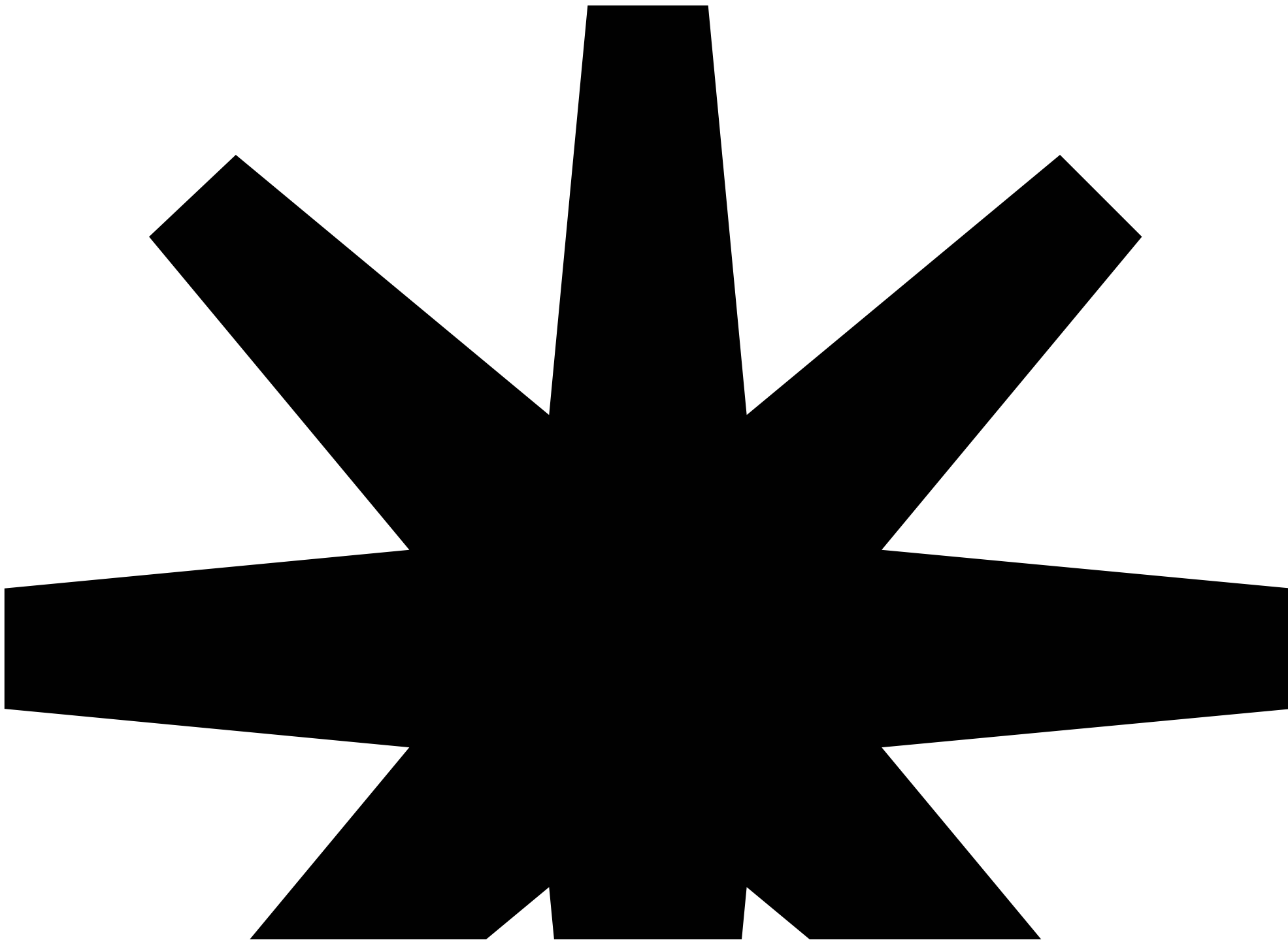
The main population of this species is in the provincial Oorlogskloof Nature Reserve where the four accused were found trespassing and illegally harvesting the plants. Le Roux said that as a member of the *Amaryllidaceae* family, *Clivia mirabilis* was unique among its genus due to its drought tolerance and specific ecological niche.

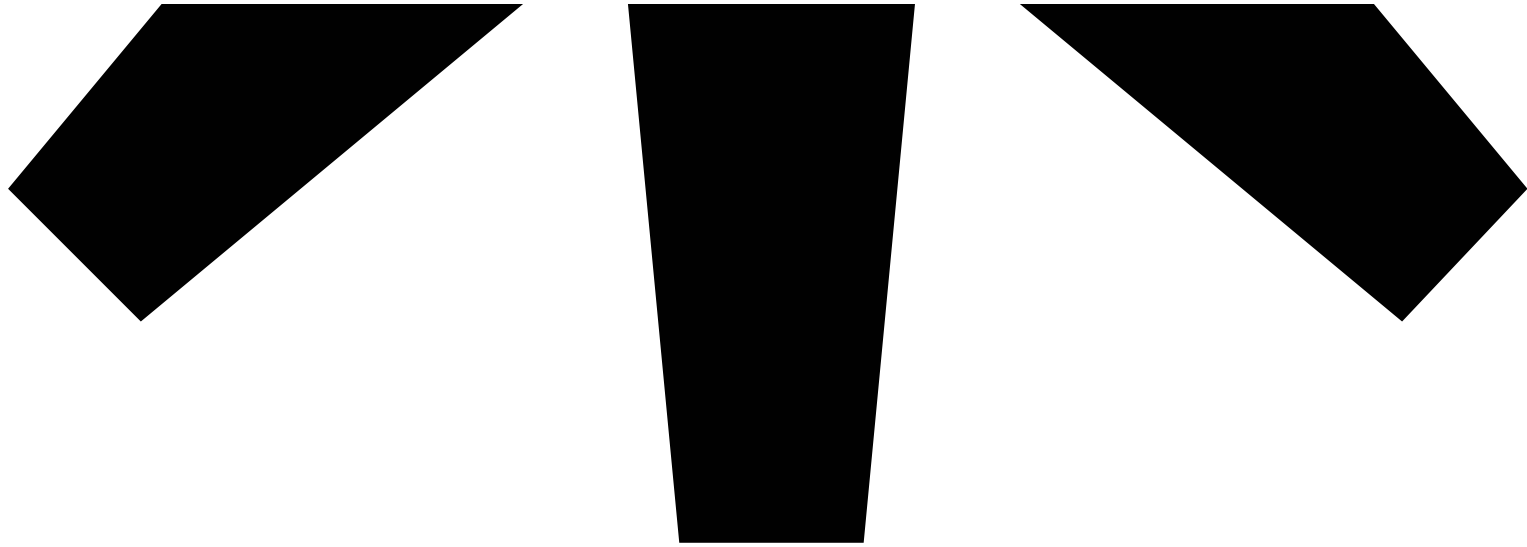
"Its extremely limited distribution and slow growth rate make it particularly vulnerable to poaching," said Le Roux.

Read more: [Rare clivias targeted in southern Africa's evolving illegal plant trade](#)

As senior ISS researcher Carina Bruwer has written in Daily Maverick, the demand for *Clivia mirabilis* appears to be concentrated predominantly in China, and supplied by local and foreign harvesters and intermediaries, often from adjacent southern African countries and Asia.

Intermediaries sell the plants via several African countries, including Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania.

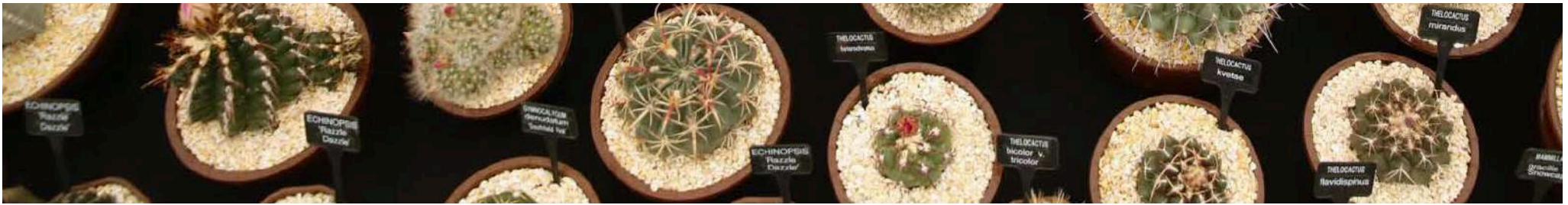




Criminal syndicates in illegal plant trade shift focus

Plant poaching threats in South Africa are now extending beyond just succulents. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a dramatic increase in plant poachers targeting unique plant species in arid areas of the country.





Cacti are displayed in the Floral Marquee tent during the press preview day of the Hampton Court Palace Flower Show on 4 July 2016 in London, England. (Photo: Dan Kitwood / Getty Images)

Now criminal syndicates are targeting a wider array of South Africa’s unique flora for illegal international markets. As WWF South Africa has said, dwarf succulents such as *Conophytums* were initially the primary focus of the illegal plant trade.

This led to many species being classified as endangered or critically endangered. But the threat has evolved, with a new focus on other valuable species such as *Clivia mirabilis*, as is seen with the recent conviction and sentencing.

Despite thriving in harsh, dry conditions unlike most forest-dwelling clivias, these plants have a slim chance of survival outside their natural environment, making their illegal harvesting particularly devastating.

Experts believe the demand is driven by enthusiasts seeking to cross-breed them.

“There is a huge following of people who collect clivias both locally and internationally... They can cross-pollinate this with other clivias and form a whole bunch of new colours and hybrids, said Le Roux.

“The opportunities for application in horticulture are quite big. That’s the big drive behind this for collectors. Everyone is trying to get seeds or pollen that they can hybridise to make something that they can sell and make their own.”

According to Le Roux, the plant is targeted by a vast number of collectors, a group far larger than the small, niche communities that seek other poached plants like smaller *Conophytums*. He said that the scale of poaching for this species was now significantly larger than for any other.

WWF South Africa reported that since October 2023, there has been a significant increase in *Clivia mirabilis* poaching incidents.

According to CapeNature, the first indication of interest in the illegal trade in *Clivia mirabilis* emerged in October 2023 when 18 plants were confiscated in Belhar, Cape Town, along with succulents.

Authorities have made several arrests over the years, but historically, low conviction rates and minimal sentencing have failed to serve as effective deterrents, making the success of this latest conviction especially noteworthy.

WWF South Africa has warned that this well-organised illegal trade often targets local communities, enticing them to harvest plants for middlemen within the syndicates.

The cross-provincial nature of the *Clivia mirabilis* habitat also complicates law enforcement due to differing regulations. Landowners are also directly affected by these illegal incursions.

The scale of an ecological heist

The value of the plants in the 3 July 2025 conviction illustrates the immense value that fuels this illegal trade, which has led to devastating losses. In one bust in February 2023, confiscated plants were estimated to be worth more than R3.5-million.

According to Le Roux’s report for the Department of Agriculture, Environmental Affairs, Rural Development and Land Reform, the scale of the plunder is staggering:

- An estimated 14,275 plants have been illegally removed between November 2023 and April 2025.
- The species, officially described only in 2002 and listed as vulnerable, is being pushed toward extinction by illegal harvesting, which disrupts ecosystems and reduces genetic diversity.
- In a targeted survey of the main *Clivia mirabilis* population in November 2024, about 3,000 plants were recorded. By December 2024, poachers had removed at least 50% of that surveyed population.

But the battle against these poachers is hampered by significant challenges. The case study found that enforcement capacity is stretched thin, with SAPS and conservation authorities lacking the dedicated personnel and resources to monitor the vast, remote and inaccessible terrain where the plants grow.

“The poaching of *Clivia mirabilis* represents a critical conservation issue that requires coordinated action at local, national and international levels. Sustainable solutions must balance enforcement with education, cultivation and community involvement to ensure the survival of this unique and beautiful species,” said Le Roux.

A new strategy

In response to the crisis, a multi-pronged strategy combining community action and new technology is being deployed.

On 20 January 2025, the Beter Hantam Trust (BHT) deployed a team of six local conservation monitors from Nieuwoudtville to protect the remaining plants.

This initiative led to a “noticeable decline in poaching incidents”. After two incursions in March 2025, the BHT expanded to 24/7 monitoring, which has since seen no further poaching events in the monitored area.

To bolster these efforts, authorities are planning to test the effectiveness of thermal drones in the Oorlogskloof Nature Reserve to detect poachers in the rugged terrain.

A funding proposal is also being developed with the assistance of TRAFFIC, an international NGO, to the Table Mountain Fund (TMF) for a proposed project which looks to assess the population status of *Clivia mirabilis* across the Western and Northern Cape provinces and to evaluate the impacts of trade and other threats on the species’ long-term survival.

Another initiative is that the Clivia Society, in collaboration with the South African National Botanical Biodiversity Institute, is exploring strategies to protect the remaining wild populations and manage confiscated plants, including potentially selling pollen or seeds to enthusiasts to alleviate pressure on wild stocks.

Despite challenges like funding and capacity, national and provincial government agencies, NGOs, landowners and local communities are working collaboratively to protect South Africa’s globally recognised biodiversity.

The survival of *Clivia mirabilis* now depends on the success of these coordinated efforts to turn the tide against the organised criminal networks stripping the Cape’s unique natural heritage. **DM**

