

Greed pushes cycads to brink of extinction

OWN CORRESPONDENT

CAPE TOWN — Cycads — bread trees to some, living fossils to others — are being driven to extinction by sheer greed.

This is the view of conservationists who cite collection of these ancient and endangered plants for private gardens as the sole reason for their plummeting populations in the wild.

The export of cycads is subject to the severe restrictions of the international CITES agreement on the trade of rare, endangered or threatened species, and South Africa is a signatory.

Now a major political row has broken out over permission for the export of more than 700 cycads to Madeira.

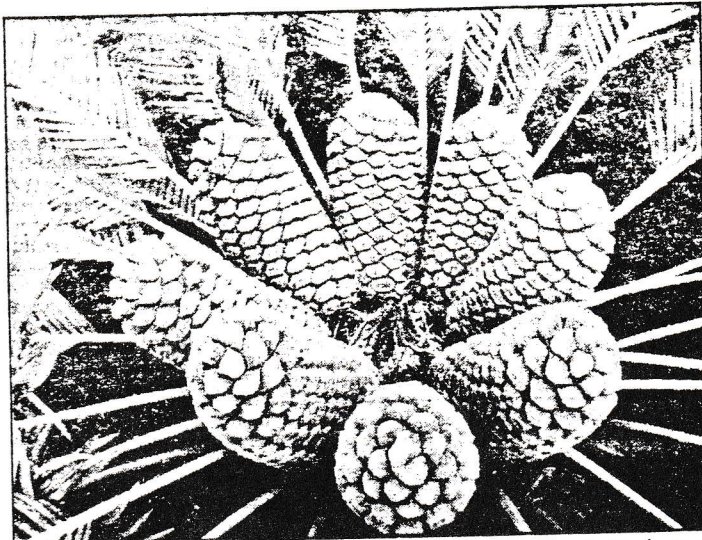
More than Kirstenbosch

The cycads are destined for the botanic gardens there. But local conservationists are demanding to know why so many are required — even the internationally-famous Kirstenbosch garden has only just over 600 specimens.

Of the 30-odd cycad species in South Africa, two have already become extinct and another four are on the brink of extinction — possibly down to as few as 10 or 15 specimens, according to Mr Douglas Goode of Durban Museum and author of a book on cycads now in production.

"Many species are endangered or threatened," he confirmed.

"And at least another 18 species are



Cycads... conservationists allege their export is being used extensively as a means of beating currency export regulations.

heading for the extinction list if nothing is done."

Why have these plants become so rare?

"First, because they grow in such incredibly difficult terrain. They are not your average plant — people just don't get to see them," Mr Goode replies.

"It's often a long, hard slog to get them, and sometimes they are only ac-

cessible by helicopter.

"Second, they are protected, so people want them.

"And third, there's the mystique of living fossils. They have been around with very little change for 150 million years — they are very stable."

Mr Goode said most cycads could be cultivated fairly easily. However, they are very slow-growing, and the biggest

and most desirable specimens may be hundreds of years old.

"To grow from seed to even a two-metre plant could easily take 100 years," Mr Goode said.

Conservationists also allege that the export of cycads is being used extensively as a means of beating currency export regulations.

Because the different species are very difficult to distinguish, and with sympathetic middlemen at foreign institutions, it's an easy matter to grossly undervalue cycads on export permits and to invest the balance overseas.

Many tempted

"It's a well-known means of sending money overseas — people don't realise there's so much money that can be made," one remarked.

There is also a substantial local market for cycads — and many are tempted by the high prices offered.

In a recent case a Pretoria man was fined R20 000 or three years in jail in Nylostroom Magistrate's Court for removing 27 cycads from a farm in the Waterberg district.

Conservationist Mr John Comrie-Greig calls the exploitation of the species "a rich man's fad" which has grown in momentum over the past 20-odd years.

"Fines are laughable because the profits of stealing cycads outweigh these fines so heavily," he said.

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State criticised for allowing export of cycads to Madeira

CAPE TOWN: Permission was given by the State for the export of 725 "priceless" cycads worth about R700 000 to Madeira because all conditions set out in an international conservation agreement had been met, Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning, Mr Chris Heunis, said in Parliament yesterday.

But Mr Rupert Lorimer (DP, Bryanston) said it appeared the exporter, Johannesburg businessman Mr Joe Berardo — "a friend of the National Party" who seemed to have "influence" — had apparently managed to "bend the regulations and export priceless specimens" which were classified as "endangered".

Speaking during a mini-inter-

Parliamentary Correspondent

pellation debate on a question by Mr Lorimer, Mr Heunis said that according to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites) trade in certain species of cycads was permissible if certain conditions were met.

These were that the export must not be detrimental to the species, that the State must be satisfied the specimens were not obtained illegally, that the State of export was satisfied the specimens were prepared and shipped in a way which minimised risk of damage, and that the State of export was satisfied the State of

import had issued an import permit.

Mr Heunis said: "In the case of the export of cycads to Madeira, all these requirements had been met and accordingly there was no reason not to issue the Cites permit."

Mr Lorimer said that whatever the technicalities of the argument, he could not understand how these "priceless, living fossils" that were possibly starting their growth when Van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape could have been allowed to leave South Africa.

He believed it amounted to a contravention of the spirit and probably the letter of the Cites agreement and he appealed for an urgent Government investiga-

tion.

He said he could not believe an export permit could have been granted unless "pressure was exerted by someone... and it must have come from high up".

"What special pull did Joe Berardo have?" He asked.

Mr Clive Derby-Lewis (CP, Nominated) asked whether it had been established that the plants had really ended up at the Madeira botanical gardens, or whether they were actually in the grounds of a new hotel being built there with South African capital.

Mr Heunis said that if Mr Lorimer had evidence of irregularities, he should set it out in an affidavit to the authorities.