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News

Scientists use DNA barcodes to fight cycad smuggling

January 12, 2010 Edition 2

JOHANNESBURG: Scientists at the University of Johannesburg have started a DNA barcoding project to stop the smuggling of endangered cycad species in the country.

Botany masters student Philip Rousseau started the project with the aim of creating a barcode library for the African Encephalartos species in an attempt to control collectors in the US and the Far East who were prepared to pay up to £6 000 (R71 300) for a large specimen of a rare species, university spokesman Herman Esterhuizen said in a statement.

The plants, taken from the wild or nature reserves and botanical gardens, were sold illegally.

"Of South Africa's 38 species of cycads, three are extinct in the wild and the remainder has been pushed close to the brink by thieves," said Rousseau.

"This project forms part of a global initiative to DNA-barcode all the trees of the world within the next five years."

Professor Michelle van der Bank of the university's department of botany and plant biotechnology said cycads were an ancient group of slow-growing plants dating to the Jurassic period. They were among the longest-lived and the most threatened group of plants worldwide.

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The web-based DNA database will enable researchers and customs officials to identify specimens. Law enforcement officials would use barcodes to find matching species.

Rousseau said tougher laws had been introduced against owning, cultivating or trading in cycads without a permit.

"Cycads grow in hot and arid environments and they grow slowly. To get a long stem might take 400 to 800 years. As a result their prices go through the roof," he said.

While new cycad species were being discovered, exploitation by humans resulted in many being listed as critically threatened or endangered.

"In South Africa, some cycad colonies have virtually been wiped out by collectors seeking a sample," Rousseau said. - Sapa

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