

SA being plundered for 'perfect species'

South Africa is the global centre of the illegal multibillion-rand trade in rare and endangered wildlife. Equipped with light aircraft, boats and specially adapted overland vehicles, syndicates - some using encrypted online mail-order services - are exploiting the rampant corruption of our officials, porous borders and weakly enforced laws to move animals into and out of the country.



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Syndicates have turned to vets and botanists to ensure that they can provide collectors and breeders - often linked to international big-game hunters - with just what they want. Wildlife crime specialists say there has been an increase in the smuggling into South Africa of sperm from highly sought after animals such as buffalo from East African game reserves.

Recent smuggling-related arrests include those of:

"Six South Africans and a Zimbabwean arrested in Zambia as they loaded 12 sable antelope calves, total value 12-million (R157million), onto a modified aircraft;

"Four South Africans while attempting to drive modified 4x4s carrying 29 sable antelope worth R500-million, across the Limpopo River from Zimbabwe to South Africa;

"French couple in the Western Cape found with 2,000 rare succulents they intended to ship to Spain.

Cycads being wiped out

South Africa's cycads are being systematically wiped out by poachers, according to SA National Biodiversity Institute cycad conservation researchers Michele Pfab and Phakamani Xaba. "In the past 15 years R11-billion worth of cycads have been poached. They are the world's most threatened organism. Of South Africa's 38 species, three are extinct in the wild and 12 critically endangered."

Pfab said those behind the trade supply collectors in Gauteng and in the US, Australia and Asia. "Poaching is responsible for 80% of this country's loss of cycads," Xaba said. Syndicates paid poachers top dollar for the plants, especially if they came with seedlings and seeds.

The hunt for perfect genes

Dr Gert Dry, president of Wildlife Ranching SA, said genetically superior animals were being sought for their "perfect genes". "Their genes ensure that they have the best horns, body size, mass and appearance. It's big business.

"A sable antelope recently auctioned for R26-million." An animal auctioneer, who did not want to be named, said the sperm of "huge and perfect big game such as buffalo from Kenya and Tanzania" were sought. "A 250ml phial can fetch 100,000 from breeders. It's a Mafia-controlled industry, driven by profits."

SA attracting organised crime

Jorge Rios, head of the UN's Global Programme for Combating Wildlife and Forest Crime, said South Africa's excellent financial systems, and its communications and transport networks, make it attractive for organised crime syndicates.

Bool Smuts, director of the Landmark Foundation, a conservation NGO specialising in human-wildlife conflict, said the wealth of the country's game ranching industry made it the world's centre for the illicit live wildlife trade.

David Newton, of Traffic - a wildlife trade monitoring group - said South Africa, the region's transport hub, was a major international conduit for wildlife and plant smuggling. "Our harbours, airports and leaky borders are exploited by syndicates. This trade has driven some species into extinction. "Given how small some plants are, they are easy to smuggle, with many taken out the country hidden in handbags."

South Africa's trade in exotics was having an effect on wild populations, especially birds such as the African grey parrot, which were in high demand because they are "good talkers". They are often exported as "captive-bred". Newton said other targeted "pets" were reptiles, especially from Madagascar, which are smuggled through South Africa. "Other desirable pets include insects, especially the rarer types of beetle," he said.

Source: The Times