

with cycads and usually do not feed on any other plant. Certain insects only feed on certain cycads that only occur in certain geographical areas. South Africa has more of these unusual insects than any other area where cycads are found.

Should cycads be removed from this area these specific insects that stay behind, will die as there are no more (or little) food for them. If one for instance takes a cycad from the wild in the Eastern Cape to a garden in Gauteng, some of the insects that live on that specific cycad may attack the other plants in the garden in an attempt to survive (and these plants might die) although it is not part of their normal diet in their natural habitat.

In an article that appeared on 23 October 1999 in the *Daily Dispatch* it was said that research sponsored by the Mazda Wildlife Fund has shown that even the beetle pollinators are disappearing. In the same article Dr John Donaldson from the National Botanical Institute responded by saying: "This means that there may be no sex at all, leaving only sterile plants that some biologists have described as the living dead."

PLANTS WITH A "SNOB" VALUE

Because cycads are rare, slow-growing, ancient plants they have tremendous status appeal, and as such command high prices in the marketplace. Therefore, poachers like to kidnap any large cycad from the wild.

Collecting cycads is like collecting art. Many people are willing to pay thousands of rands for some of the rare species. Cycads have a "snob" value due to the fact that they are highly valued by collectors and landscapers and many people like the idea of having a prehistoric plant in their garden. The rarer a species the more desirable it becomes to certain collectors.

Unfortunately some of them will go to extremes in acquiring such plants, even if it means taking them illegally from nature. Wealthy homeowners perpetuate the illegal trade in endangered cycads. They must be taught that it is irresponsible and ecologically criminal to buy adult cycads without a permit.

At this stage people pay from R250 for the seed with one leaf of the rare cycad species. Depending on the type of plant, prices range from R45 to R800 per cm. Some plants are 4 m and higher, depending on the species.

SOME RARE CYCADS

In nature there is an imbalance between female and male plants (eg 90% male and 10% female). As already said, a big distance between the plants prevents the natural way of pollination, contributing to many cycads becoming endangered. A

few of the endangered and rare cycad species are mentioned here. The rarest cycad in the world is a South African cycad, *Encephalartos woodii*. Only male specimens of this plant are known, which means that it is not able to produce seeds. However, cycads can also reproduce by means of suckers that grow from the base of the stem.

Encephalartos latifrons, is another rare South African cycad and in 1999 conservationists estimated that only between 100 to 200 plants still existed in the wild. The first director of the Kirstenbosch Botanic Garden, Prof H H W Pearson, wrote in 1916: "This species appears to be on the verge of extinction. It is only known to occur in two localities, in which the plants are now very hard to find." The small number of *E. latifrons* speci-



A very rare cycad has managed to survive – here the cables that help to anchor the plant in its original habitat are cut.



People sometimes confuse *Encephalartos arenarius* with *Encephalartos latifrons*. The stems of *Encephalartos arenarius* (on the photo) are only 1 m high and only grow in the coastal areas of Alexandria in the Eastern Cape



The *Encephalartos Altensteinii* of the Eastern Cape

mens which existed then, have all found their way to collections in South Africa and abroad, despite the fact that the species has been a declared endangered species in the Cape Province for a long time. Even those protected on land belonging to the Forestry Department, were stolen. For all practical purposes, this species has become extinct in nature at this stage.

One often hears from arrogant multi-millionaires who are cycad smugglers, who have removed approximately a third of the most rarest species from the veld, and who then claim

that they have done it to save the species from extinction.

Encephalartos paucidentatus, *E. laevifolius* and *E. heenanii* are also three very scarce cycad species. In a survey that was done during 1985, it was found that fewer than 500 plants existed in the wild. The inaccessibility of the terrain where they grow naturally is no deterrent to poachers, as they even hire helicopters to remove mature specimens. This species is considered to be endangered and close to extinction.

Encephalartos aemulans is a species that has been collected long before it has been botanically described and can be found in private collections. Plants have even been collected from protected sites and for that reason information about locality is kept secret to protect the plants. While one popula-