

# SOUTH AFRICA'S CYCADS

## IDENTIFICATION AND LEGISLATION

Cycads date back to the time of the dinosaurs. They are the most ancient seed plants remaining and have survived three mass extinctions in Earth's history...until now. The actions of modern humans have caused a cycad extinction crisis in South Africa.

### WHAT ARE CYCADS?

Cycads are an ancient group of seed plants dating back 280 million years. They have a trunk, leaves and cones, all covered with stiff, sharp spines. They are often confused with Cycas and palms. While not as common today, they were during the Jurassic period, which is often referred to as the "Age of Cycads".

### THREATS TO CYCADS IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is a hotspot for cycad diversity with 38 indigenous species (over 10% of the world's cycads). Thirty seven of these species belong to the genus *Encephalartos* of which more than 70% face extinction. Illegal harvesting from the wild is the most significant threat to indigenous cycad species and is driven by the local and international demand for plants to use in private gardens and collections.

### CYCADS AND THE LAW

According to national environmental legislation, the trade in cycads taken out of the wild is prohibited. The following national laws regulate biodiversity and provide protection for various species, including cycads:

- National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act 10 of 2004 (NEMBA), read with
- Threatened or Protected Species (TOPS) Regulations, 2007,
- Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) Regulations 2010. CITES applies when listed species are subject to import or export related activities and this includes specimens, parts and derivatives of all cycad species.

National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act 57 of 2003 (NEMPAA), protects all biodiversity in protected areas.

Each province also has conservation laws to further protect and regulate cycad trade.

### OBTAINING CYCADS LEGALLY

There are legal methods of obtaining and keeping artificially propagated cycads. If you are in possession of an indigenous cycad, or if you purchase a cycad, you need to obtain a permit. This will help to protect these threatened species from illegal trade. If you are in possession of an exotic cycad, you may not need a permit. To find out what the requirements are for your area, or if you have any other queries, please refer to the relevant contact details below. contact the relevant department below.



### IS IT A CYCAD?

South Africa is home to numerous *Encephalartos* species, each with its own distinct features. *Encephalartos* Cycads are often confused with palms and tree ferns and can be difficult to identify. Here's how to check if you have an *Encephalartos* cycad in your garden. If you are still unsure or have any other queries, please refer to the relevant contact details below.

When identifying *Encephalartos* cycad species in South Africa, the following key features are commonly considered:

#### TRUNK

*Encephalartos* Cycads have cylindrical trunks that do not usually branch. The trunk may be buried with the leaves appearing to be emerging from the ground.



*Encephalartos* trunks have spirals of relatively smooth diamond-shaped leaf scars.



trunk with diamond-shaped leaf scars

#### LEAVES

*Encephalartos* leaves grow directly from the trunk in a whorled formation, and typically fall as they get older, leaving a crown of newer leaves at the top.

Leaves have leaflets arranged on either side of the stem.



*Encephalartos* leaflets have sunken, parallel veins and no mid vein. If there is a mid vein, it is not an *Encephalartos* species.

Leaflets are hard and prickly and don't bend easily. They may be green, blue-green, or grey.



Leaflets are always narrower closer to the stem and are clearly smaller closer to the base, which is thornless.



leaflet tapering

#### PLANT REPRODUCTION

If the plants are in reproductive condition, there is no possibility of confusing them with palms because cycads bear large, conspicuous cones but no flowers, whereas palms bear small inconspicuous flowers.



cone

### NATIONAL CONTACT DETAILS FOR INFORMATION AND PERMITS

The Department of Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment

DFFE-TOPS & CITES Permits  
The EWT Wildlife in Trade Programme

General enquiries: 086 111 2468  
Switch board: 012 399 9000

012 399 8818  
witinfo@ewt.org.za

### PROVINCIAL CONTACTS

Eastern Cape 045 808 4000  
Free State 051 404 9600  
Gauteng 011 240 3184  
kwaZulu-Natal 033 845 1654  
Limpopo 015 297 3839

Mpumalanga 013 065 0627  
Northern Cape 087 630 0387  
North West 018 389 5093  
Western Cape 021 483 0121

Report cycad theft to the  
National Environmental  
Crimes and Incidents  
Hotline

0800 205 005



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