

The Rape of the Pelargoniums

By Dr Janice Limson

As the sun beats down on Africa, a woman in a veld in the Eastern Cape of South Africa is hunched over her task - uprooting a species of flowering plant, the *Pelargonium reniforme*. With a spade she digs right down to the roots, until she has unearthed the whole tuber which she breaks off, dumping the head and adding the tuber to the rest in a bag she carries with her. She and her friends working quietly in a row alongside know that tonight they will be eating - a man will be paying her between ZAR3 and ZAR15 per kilogram for the roots they collect. As the story goes, the local man transports truckloads of the roots to agents in Hermanus in the Western Cape from where they are exported to Europe. According to nature conservation official Quintus Hahndiek a conservative estimate is that at least twenty tons of the root have vanished from the Eastern Cape.

The *Pelargonium reniforme* is a medicinal plant known to generations of Khoi/San descendants and Xhosa traditional healers for its health-giving properties in curing stomach ailments, dysentery, blood in stools and the like. This species of pelargonium is indigenous to the Eastern Cape and grows wild, sending out long bulbous roots deep into the ground. The medicinally active ingredients are found in the bitter tasting root of the plant.

There are two issues at stake - the unsustainable and indiscriminate removal of indigenous plants and the export of traditional knowledge. This mass removal of these plants will only enrich a few to the detriment of sustainability for future generations of Africans. Unlike species such as cycads, which are strictly controlled, the pelargoniums are not endangered (yet) and not protected under any regulations. To abuse a pun: nature conservation officials find their hands effectively tied with red tape - hands that should be out there catching plant poachers. According to Eastern Cape Nature Conservation officials legislation to protect a range of species including the pelargoniums have been 6 years in the pipeline and are still doing time on someone's desk waiting for the promulgation of the new environmental bill. In the meantime, plant poachers and bioprospectors have free reign. In a year or two when strong legislation comes into effect to protect indigenous plants - it may be way too late.

Africa is home to a veritable wealth of plant species, many of which contain active ingredients with as yet untold social and economic benefits for humankind. Traditional knowledge holds the secret and key to many of the potentially economically viable species of health-giving plants. The case with the pelargoniums is a harbinger of things to come. Africa must harness its biodiversity for Africa. We have the scientists, the tools and the know-how. Laws should be in place to protect both indigenous knowledge and indigenous plants - but they are not.

In the case of the pelargoniums, nature conservation officials say they have a good idea as to who may be behind the mass removal of the species, but these individuals are protected by loopholes in the law. According to local botanist Tony Dold people have regularly visited his herbarium over the past three years asking for assistance in identifying several medicinal plants, claiming that they had permits to collect these. Dold says that the visitors admitted then that they were screening plants used in traditional medicines for medicinal properties, enlisting the help of rural people in the former Ciskei. Armed with a book containing Xhosa names of the plants, it was a simple matter for them to enlist someone in the Ciskei to find a plant in question. According to Dold it seems they "obviously had a 'hit' " with the Pelargonium and may be the ones who have organized and conducted the mass removal of pelargoniums from the Eastern Cape and export to Europe. Who pays? At present it is the very poor and ignorant who are paying the price. Several Eastern Cape locals have been arrested for illegal collection of the plant on private property. While this serves merely as a warning - they will most likely not be fined nor found guilty.

According to Hahndiek the pelargoniums are not at any risk now of becoming extinct, but in a worst case scenario if this were to continue, land and insects would be paying the price with loss of ground cover, endangerment of the species and ripple effects to insects, such as pollinators feeding from the plant. But there are many other species out there that have caught the attention of bioprospectors such as the threatened African potato. According to Hahndiek nature conservation faces a similar threat from the over-collection of rare and endangered species by traditional healers. The issue says Hahndiek is that of sustainability. Once it's gone it's gone. "It is not just the Eastern Cape, where problems are being experienced, a conservation official from DR Congo painted a bleak picture with mass removal and decimation of plant species. In the Western Cape you have serious problems with the removal of buchu. In other areas its Dassie urine - urine from dassies is used to make expensive foreign perfumes."

Quintus Hahndiek is a concerned man. Nature conservation is understaffed at only 25% of capacity as posts have been frozen in the past few years and remain so. He shows me a pile of proposals for conservation policy that he and others are impatiently waiting to get passed. He is frustrated at the lack of real power they have to protect the environment. Part of the trouble he says is the lack of a national body overseeing all of the nature conservation regions which he says all work separately, each group having to petition for the same laws to get passed for their regions. He is frustrated that traditional knowledge and potential income is leaving the country when Africa should be its beneficiaries. One very simple way he believes to stem this tide and protect traditional knowledge is to pass regulation forbidding the export of all indigenous plants to foreign climes.

The time has come and gone for us to stop paying lip service to the protection of Africa's biodiversity and its traditional knowledge. But it's not too late for us to pull the wool from our eyes, for the powers that be in South Africa to promulgate and enforce the new environmental bill so that nature conservation can get out there and DO their job. Now.

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