



Cycad Specialist Group

25 June 2021

To Whom it May concern

### **Importance of properties Bezuidenhoutshoek 274JS and Bankfontein 264J) for conservation of Critically Endangered Cycads**

This letter is submitted on behalf of the IUCN/SSC Cycad Specialist Group and is intended to emphasize the vital importance of the properties Bezuidenhoutshoek and Bankfontein as part of national and global efforts to protect Critically Endangered cycads. These properties have already been identified as critical for biodiversity conservation in the National Biodiversity Assessment (2018) and Mpumalanga Biodiversity Plan (2014) with elements of biodiversity that are irreplaceable. The diverse assemblage of plants includes two species of cycad, *Encephalartos middelburgensis* and *E. lanatus* and I would like to highlight the threats faced by these plants in the event of any landuse change and particularly any mining activities.

South Africa has the unenviable status as the global centre for cycad extinctions. Of ca. 350 species known worldwide, there are six records of Extinction in the Wild since 1900 and five of them are from South Africa. There are a further 10 species in South Africa that are Critically Endangered, which means there is serious risk of extinction in the wild unless drastic steps are taken to conserve them. South Africa should be doing everything in its power to protect these species. One of these species is *Encephalartos middelburgensis* and a major contribution towards protecting these plants is the establishment of private nature reserves such as the one comprising Bezuidenhoutshoek and Bankfontein.

*Encephalartos middelburgensis* occurs on only a few properties and has been decimated by illegal collecting over the past 40 years. Protection from harvesting, particularly in reserves is an essential first step to conserving and then recovering this species. In the case of *E. middelburgensis*, the subpopulation at Bezuidenhoutshoek and Bankfontein is one of the only sites where specialist pollinators required for the survival of this species have been found. Past experience from across South Africa shows a strong correlation between poaching pressure on cycads and increased access to wild sites through road building, mining, forestry, and power line servitudes. These activities should not be allowed at critical sites if there is any serious intent to conserve *E. middelburgensis*. Usually such a statement would include the caveat 'unless suitable mitigation measures are in place' but there are no known mitigation actions that have been successful in stopping poaching in South Africa except more secure protected areas. The gazetted management plan for *E. middelburgensis* (Government Gazette 40815, 2017) includes actions to increase population numbers in this private reserve, which involves planting out seedlings and juvenile plants. This effort will be futile unless both the existing plants and newly transplanted ones have a strong level of protection from changes in landuse and increased poaching pressure.

Although *E. lanatus* is currently listed on the IUCN Red List as Near Threatened, it also occurs in only a small area in the Olifants River catchment and its current status is contingent upon a stable (not



Cycad Specialist Group

declining) population. There is evidence of decline in some smaller locations but secure sub-populations in Bezuidenhoutshoek are vital to maintain the status as NT. Any impacts of mining would immediately result in an uplisting to Vulnerable under IUCN criteria B1ab(i) and B2ab(i).

In summary, South Africa currently has the worst Red List Index for cycads globally and this has declined sharply since 2003 with an increasing number of cycads becoming Extinct in the Wild. The plight of South Africa's cycads has been taken to Cabinet level with the gazetting of Biodiversity Management Plans to improve the status of the most threatened species. Actions such as the establishment of private reserves and recovery plans are positive steps that can alter the trajectory of decline. However, these management plans have little hope of success if high risk activities are allowed to proceed in sites that are essential for the survival of the affected species.

I trust that the relevant authorities will note the importance of these properties for conservation in general, and for cycads in particular, and take the necessary steps to ensure their protection.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'John Donaldson'.

Professor John Donaldson

IUCN/SSC Cycad Specialist Group (co-Chair)

co-Chair: Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Assessment for the Sustainable Use of Wild Species

Scientific & Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) of the Global Environmental Facility, United Nation Environment Program

Email: [JD@cycads2050.org](mailto:JD@cycads2050.org)

Tel. +27 827183253