

# Foreword

Biodiversity loss is one of the world's most pressing crises. Species are declining to critical population levels, important habitats are being destroyed, and ecosystems are being destabilised through climate change, pollution, alien invasive species, and direct human impacts. Yet there is also growing awareness of how biodiversity supports livelihoods, allows sustainable development, and fosters co-operation between nations. This awareness is promoted globally through products like the *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*. Awareness is also generated at local levels through the production of regional and national Red Lists. The *Southern African Plant Red Data Lists* publication is an excellent example of such a contribution.

Red Data Lists are intended to be comprehensive and authoritative accounts of the global, regional or national conservation status of plants and animals. These publications help to convey the urgency and scale of conservation problems to the public and policy-makers, and are used to motivate the global community to take appropriate actions to reduce the loss of species. The Red Data Lists also help to establish conservation priorities at the local level and guide conservation actions.

The *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* is compiled mainly through contributions from IUCN's 7,000 member Species Survival Commission (SSC) and partner organizations. However, regional and national Red List initiatives are making an increasingly important contribution to the IUCN Red List. Contributions from botanists on the state of Africa's plants have historically been very poor because of the lack of knowledge and lack of local capacity to collect such information. The IUCN's prototype Red Data Book *Animals and Plants Threatened with Extinction* produced in 1962, included a report on 'plants in danger' compiled by Noel Simon and Ronald Melville. African plants did not feature highly in this report, although *Encephalartos* and *Welwitschia* were mentioned. Similarly, Nigel Hepper's contribution, on the 'conservation of rare and vanishing plant species' in *The Red Book: Wildlife in Danger* produced by IUCN in 1969 does not mention any African plant species. A turning point came a year later, when data began to be more readily forthcoming. Ronald Melville included ten African plants in the *Red Data Book: Angiospermae* published by IUCN in 1970, nine of these plants were from South Africa. The trend continued with *The IUCN Plant Red Data Book* published in 1978, when Gren Lucas and Hugh Synge included accounts on 27 Sub-Saharan African plant species among the 250 accounts in the book. Fifteen of these species were from southern Africa. The southern African accounts were based on information provided by Anthony Hall and his co-

workers as a result of their pioneering efforts to compile the first list of *Threatened Plants of Southern Africa* in 1980.

Since the late 1970s, southern African botanists have made increasingly important contributions to the global IUCN Red Lists (1997–2000) through the ongoing compilation and publication of local, national, and regional Red Lists. Unfortunately, contributions from botanists to the north of the Limpopo River have been sadly lacking. This lack of input was certainly not because there were no conservation problems or that there was no awareness of the threats to species. In 1966, a symposium was held at the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Association for the Taxonomic Study of the Flora of Tropical Africa (AETFAT) in Uppsala, Sweden, which looked at the *Conservation of Vegetation in Africa South of the Sahara*. Although the symposium primarily focussed on the conservation of habitats and ecosystems, threats to species were mentioned in the proceedings, which were published in 1968. For example, the late Hiram Wild (1968 pp. 54) in discussing the status of conservation in what is now Zimbabwe said the following:

There has been some concern expressed in recent years by the hawking, mainly in towns, of indigenous plants dug up from the wild. These include *Gloriosa superba*, *Eulophia petersii*, *Ansellia nilotica*, *Phoenix reclinata*, *Hyphaene ventricosa*, *Adiantum capillus-veneris*, *Aloespp.*, and *Monadenium obesum* var. *multiflorum*. None of these plants is rare but continued depredations could be harmful even to large populations.

Almost 35 years later, the *Adenium* and 14 *Aloe* taxa are listed as threatened in the account for Zimbabwe in this new southern African Red Data List.

Following the conservation symposium in 1966, Inga Hedberg, a renowned Swedish botanist who has done much to promote taxonomy and plant conservation in Africa, made a concerted effort to gather information on threatened plant species in Africa. This was compiled as a set of preliminary lists of rare and threatened species for various African countries and published in the symposium proceedings *Systematic Botany, Plant Utilization and Biosphere Conservation* in 1979 (pp. 82–104). This publication included lists for Angola (albeit very limited), Lesotho, South Africa, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe. Botswana at that stage was thought not to have any threatened species (thirteen are now listed in the *Southern African Plant Red Data Lists*) and Mozambique was not even mentioned. The lists were given to the then IUCN Threatened Plants Committee and the informa-

tion was incorporated into the threatened plants database. These preliminary lists formed in part the basis for the first attempted complete listing of threatened plants in the 1997 *IUCN Red List of Threatened Plants*.

In the introduction to the preliminary lists, Inga Hedberg pointed out that two important prerequisites for plant conservation were sadly lacking in Africa. These prerequisites are a comparatively detailed knowledge of the flora and organizations to take care of this knowledge and act upon it. Although the exploration of the African flora continues, our knowledge today is still incomplete. Even areas that have been relatively well explored are still floristically poorly known. Similarly, although many countries now have organizations to take conservation action, this is still lacking in key areas or is non-functional. Even in cases where such organizations do exist and are active, very few are concerned with the conservation of vegetation let alone individual plant species. Steps to reverse this situation are being taken and the Southern African Botanical Diversity Network (SABONET) is leading the way. SABONET is developing a strong core of professional botanists, taxonomists, horticulturists and plant diversity specialists across all ten southern African countries. These people have been trained to compile inventories, to evaluate the conservation status of plant species, to monitor these species, and to help conserve the botanical diversity of the region.

The capacity and competence that have been established through the SABONET project are clearly evident in the high quality content of the *Southern African Plant Red Data Lists*. Although we still have a long way to go in countries like Angola and Mozambique, a solid foundation for the future work has been laid. The co-ordinator, Janice Golding, and her team of national co-ordinators are to be congratulated on their perseverance to ensure participation and input from the region's botanists. In addition to producing the first ever comprehensive and documented plant Red Data List for the whole region, a network of southern African threatened plant professionals has been established. This can only bode well for the future of plant conservation in southern Africa. Through projects like the SABONET Red Data List, southern Africa is taking its rightful place as a leader on the world-stage of plant conservation. The *Southern African Plant Red Data Lists* should be used as a model for what can be achieved elsewhere in Africa and even other parts of the world.

**Craig Hilton-Taylor**

IUCN Red List Programme Officer, Cambridge, United Kingdom  
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