

SEEDS FOR A RAINY DAY

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/seedsforainyday.shtml>

Rescuing some of our rarest plants in the grasslands of South Africa

Tuesday 23 March 2004 11.00-11.30am

Sandra Sykes joins plant collectors in the grasslands of South Africa in search of seeds from some of the rarest and most threatened plant species in the world for the Millennium Seed Bank Project. This has been set up by the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, with a view over the next decade to collecting twenty four thousand species, representing ten per cent of the world's flora, which are then stored in vaults at very low temperatures, perhaps for hundreds of years, remaining viable so that they may be grown on some future rainy day.

The search begins on the Umtamvuna Nature Reserve where there are over twelve hundred different plants – that's more than in the whole of Great Britain – many of them rarer than the rhino. On the first day the team, led by Erich van Wyk is fortunate to find several rare endemic species including Erich's name sake, *Canthium van Wykii*.

It takes a hundred mile journey the next day to find three species of the rare *Hypoxis* plant on a roadside embankment where they had been previously spotted but had not been in seed. This species is endangered because like many of these veldt plants its habitat has been taken over with the coming of the plantations and because its bulb is highly sought after for use in the traditional medicine trade in the treatment of the symptoms of AIDS.

Erich van Wyk, Livu Nkuna and Robert Klein of the S.African Millennium Seed Bank Project, collecting *Hypoxis*.

Erich van Wyk, Livu Nkuna and Robert Klein of the S.African Millennium Seed Bank Project, collecting *Hypoxis*. Researchers from the University of Kwa Zulu-Natal show Sandra Sykes the extent of the trade in bulbs, roots, bark and leaves as she visits one of the largest traditional medicine markets in Durban. Traders and healers are dealing in the very plants the team are looking for, taking whole plants and endangering their own resources. Yet not all is lost because even though many of these plants are resistant to the normal methods of storage some are being saved through ground breaking research at the University. The task is not only to save threatened plants but also to preserve the economy of those who may be destroying them.

Sandra Sykes at the traditional medicine market on the outskirts of Durban.

Sandra Sykes at the traditional medicine market on the outskirts of Durban. On the final day the team finds one of the rarest plants in South Africa – the Pondoland Ghost bush with only very few plants known to exist. So often the team spend many days without success perhaps locating the plants they want to collect only to find they are not in seed or that the seed is not ripe This 'eureka moment' is a fitting end to a time spent with such professional and dedicated people.
