



Above: A 200-year-old cycad, *Encephalartos longifolius*
Right: *E. Hilderbrandtii* from tropical East Africa

The Endangered Cycads

All cycads are long-lived. The plant of *Encephalartos longifolius* above is well over 200 years old, and probably the oldest greenhouse plant in the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. It was brought to London in 1775. Unfortunately, many cycads are now threatened, and most are rare, due largely to loss of habitat and especially to collecting for the horticultural trade. They are very slow-growing and difficult to propagate, so it is very tempting to collect wild plants.

Cycads grow mainly in arid parts of Australia, South Africa, the southern United States and Mexico, with outliers in central Africa, South America and the Caribbean, and from India through south-east Asia to the Pacific. Superficially they resemble palms, but botanically they are more closely related to conifers. They have naked seeds in cones and are therefore classified as gymnosperms.

In South Africa they are effectively protected, even to the point where one species *E. latifrons*, which had become too widely and thinly scattered to reproduce, could not be artificially pollinated in the wild because stringent laws prevented it. In the USA, however, imports and exports are controlled, but week-end collecting of wild plants by the truck-load is still common. All cycads are on the Appendices of CITES: *Encephalartos*, *Microcycas* and *Stangeria* species are on Appendix I which prohibits all trade, and the rest on II, which allows trade only by licence. The Threatened Plants Committee (TPC) is compiling a world list of species with status detail.

Only one species *Encephalartos woodii* is known to be extinct in the wild, but a branch from the only plant that was ever found in the wild, in South Africa in 1895, now grows in the Palm House at Kew, and offshoots from it have been sent to other botanic gardens. Of the 165 species in 11 genera accepted so far, 116 are in cultivation in botanic gardens.

SARA OLDFIELD