

But it can also mean
destruction of your joints.



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Cactus Thieves Running Amok

By Hilary Hylton

They look sturdy, even hostile, but cactus plants in the southwestern United States and Mexico are under attack. According to wildlife conservationists, cactuses are being dug up and smuggled away at an alarming rate by over-zealous collectors looking for rare species and "narco-tourists" mining the desert for the small, psychotropic peyote plant.

The thievery is fueled in part by the conservation effort itself. "International rules aimed at preventing the movement of plants and seeds in order to protect them have had unintended consequences," says Dick Wiedhopf, president of the Cactus and Succulent Society of America and its Tucson chapter. "They have made [cactuses] more valuable." That explains why wildlife — including cactus — ranks just below drugs and guns as the most popular good smuggled out of Mexico, according to experts.

Cactus collectors are a surprisingly fervid bunch. A trawl of the enthusiasts' presence on the Internet — some of the plants' biggest fans are in Scandinavia, the Czech Republic and Japan — yields hundreds of sites offering information about cactuses as well as nurseries where collectors can buy. "There are more sites, more information than we have ever had," Wiedhopf says. "It's marvelous. That's the upside." The problem is that some collectors don't want to buy from nurseries. Rather than purchasing from, say, the acres and acres of cacti nurseries in the Netherlands, avid collectors travel to Mexico instead, according to Dr. Martin Terry, a biologist at Sul Ross University in West Texas and co-founder of the [Cactus Conservation Institute \(CCI\)](#), where they "roam the boondocks, see a rare species, dig it up and FedEx it home, avoiding all the inspections along the way." For the travel-averse, there's no shortage of cactus dealers online: a 2005 Mexican study found nearly 4,000 websites selling cactuses, and 500 were run by illicit traders, who constantly switch Web servers and names to elude law enforcement. "The downside," says Wiedhopf, "is that this is a world where some people have a sense of greed, a need for personal acquisition."

"Mexico's cactus diversity attracts the interest of international markets and collectors who employ illegal tactics to obtain wild-collected specimens of desirable species, some of which may be newly named to science, rare, or threatened with extinction," according to a World Wildlife Fund study authored by Rolando Barcenás Luna of the Autonomous University of Queretaro, Mexico. Barcenás and Terry are

members of a team of biologists currently mapping several threatened cactus species through DNA sampling, but their project is often stymied by growing threats to the plants from illegal harvesting and destruction by drug traffickers. There are almost 700 species of cactus in Mexico and a third of them are threatened; consequently scientists keep location information private in their database, Terry says, but despite their efforts, the destruction continues.

There are laws in both the southwestern U.S. and Mexico, plus international trade regulations that protect endangered and threatened cactus, and also govern the sale and movement of other cactus species. But since most cactus plants flourish in desert regions with low populations and infrequent law enforcement, catching smugglers is a challenge, often made even more difficult in Mexico by poverty: local residents sell plants for a pittance to smugglers who then sell them to collectors at much higher prices, according to experts.

Two hundred and seventy miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border, the dusty old mining town of Real de Catorce has been reborn. Though the Mexican government officially condemns the harvesting of the psychotropic peyote cactus by anyone outside the Huichol Indian community of Central Mexico, whose members use it for religious purposes, Real de Catorce's [website](#) advertises the town as the place of the "pilgrimage of people of all ages and nationalities...[who] travel thousands of miles to arrive at this sacred site and experience a mystical communion with the magical cactus." Now narco-tourists are ravaging the Huichols' sacred peyote lands, says Terry, who surveyed the countryside himself this summer. He says he found many sites in the region laid to waste, the mescaline extracted and the plants destroyed.

In Texas, harvesting of peyote has been licensed since the 1970s for use in the Native American Church. But the number of legal peyote harvesters, known as *peyoter*os, has shrunk from two dozen to just three. Most of the land in South Texas where peyote grows is privately held (Texas law prohibits removal of cactus from public land), so *peyoter*os must pay landowners to access their ranchland. The job is hardly worth the hazards, however: rugged land populated with dangerous wildlife and, sometimes, even more dangerous smugglers. And the fees that go to absentee landowners — a few hundred dollars a year — don't justify the potential legal liability they'll face if *peyoter*os get hurt on their property, Terry says. So, the peyote patches that end up being most easily accessible to harvesters are over-picked to meet growing demand from the church.

Meanwhile, the hunt for peyote has also driven the star cactus to the brink of endangerment, Terry warns — the star cactus looks confusingly similar to peyote to the untrained eye — and Terry has surveyed many large star cactus sites destroyed in South Texas, prompting CCI to raise funds for a cactus preserve in four counties along the Rio Grande.

Cactus-rescue programs are also underway in neighboring Arizona, which has some of the most stringent cactus collection and preservation laws in the U.S. Landowners and developers in that state, for example, cannot move any cactus from its natural habitat without a license from the Department of Agriculture — and all legally moved or sold cactuses, even the tiny souvenir plants sold at the Phoenix airport, come with an official tag. So, conservationists have stepped in with an everybody-wins plan: the [Tucson Cactus](#)

[Society](#)'s internationally recognized rescue program seeks permission to harvest plants at development and mining sites, tag and sell them — the money raised goes into teaching grants aimed at raising cactus awareness in local schools.

The society is now gearing up to launch another protection program for Arizona's signature cactus, the saguaro, whose beautiful white blossoms are the state flower. While the saguaro is not among Arizona's seven endangered cactus species, the shallow-rooted plant is often preyed upon by poachers, who can earn up to \$60 a foot for a wild specimen, Wiedhopf says. The desert symbol grows slowly, about an inch a year — it can take six or seven decades for the saguaro cactus to grow an arm — and those 15-to-20-foot saguaros that dot the Sonoran desert can be over 200 years old. According to state law, any saguaro cactus over four feet tall cannot be moved from public or private land without a permit. To help prevent their removal, the Cactus Society has initiated talks with state and federal wildlife officials about implanting wild saguaros with memory chips that can be scanned and tracked.

But despite conservationists best efforts, poachers and drug smugglers have little regard for them — or for protection laws. Some hard-core collectors won't miss any opportunity to swipe a cactus. That's why visitors to Copenhagen's botanical gardens must view rare cactus plants behind glass walls and, as a curator at London's world famous Kew Gardens told Terry, "Every year, we put out a plant and every year someone steals it."

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