Cycads are certainly the trees of myth and legend especially in southern Africa as many are found in the land of the Rain Queen, a place of mystery and secrets. Their history fills one with awe; their ancestors lived side by side with dinosaurs and they were hardy enough to survive the mass extinction of their counterparts. They have been around from as early as 280 million years ago! It is thus regrettable that cycads are among a list of the most endangered plant species in the world.

**Protected plants: cycads**

Although cycads display remarkable longevity, their relatively limited window of opportunity for reproduction coupled with the high demand for them has been detrimental to their survival. An ownership permit is therefore required for some of them, they are protected by the SA law and are listed by CITES. Nearly 70% of SA cycads are endangered and cycads may not be harvested from the wild. All indigenous Encephalartos cycad species are protected in SA and the stamps all feature the species. Of the 308 species of cycads on the planet, SA's 38 cycad species are the most threatened plant group in the world.

**Woolly cycad** (*Encephalartos heenani*)
This plant grows on very steep slopes in short grassveld in deep valleys between indigenous forests in the Barberton district of Mpumalanga, South Africa. They also grow in Swaziland. The plant forms an unbranched, erect stem. The leaves are stiff and curve gently upward and inwards and have a waxy glass appearance. The plant grows relatively slow and is critically endangered in the wild.

**Venda cycad** (*Encephalartos hirsutus*)
This plant grows in moist areas in Limpopo, the most northern part of SA. It is recognised by its very hairy leaves and angle of their leaflets. This species is a slow grower and mature plant thrive in full sunlight.

**Lydenburg cycad** (*Encephalartos inopinus*)
Because of its characteristic silvery green leaf colour and leaf form which reflects down from the rachis, this species can hardly be confused with any of the other southern African cycad species. These plants grow on steep mountain slopes and on dolomite cliffs in dense scrub. This species is unusual for the genus in that its female cones are receptive to pollination about a month before attaining its full size, and the female cones remain "open" for pollination for only about three days. It is among the most expensive cycads in the world to obtain. This is because of rarity and lack of availability of seeds.

**Kaapheuop cycad** (*Encephalartos laevifolius*)
The name refers to the smoothness of the plant's leaflets. The plants are mostly to be found in rocky areas on steep inclines or on the edge of a plateau in short grassveld in full sunlight.

**Albany cycad** (*Encephalartos latifrons*)
This cycad species was described in 1837. This plant description derives from the wide leaf. The main characteristic of the species is the upper surface of the mature leaflets which is rough to the touch. The species is restricted to the Bathurst district of the Eastern Cape. The few remaining wild plants are so widely separated that natural pollination is impossible and consequently seedling regeneration does not exist.

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_Cornia Hugo, a specialist on cycads, divided indigenous SA cycad species into six groups according to the leaf shape, colour, width, margin and flexibility. The following cycad species are featured on the stamps:_

*Woolly cycad* (*Encephalartos heenani*)
*Venda cycad* (*Encephalartos hirsutus*)
*Lydenburg cycad* (*Encephalartos inopinus*)
*Kaapheuop cycad* (*Encephalartos laevifolius*)
*Albany cycad* (*Encephalartos latifrons*)