

The mysterious case of the disappearing pencil cedar

May 28 2019, by Tim Knight



Credit: Fauna & Flora International

Is it too early to talk about Christmas? Some might consider midway through May to be slightly premature, to put it mildly. But when it comes to saving critically endangered trees, there's no time like the present. Having said that, we first need to delve briefly into the past in order to provide some context.

Once upon a time, the West Indies had its very own species of [juniper](#) tree. Known colloquially as the pencil cedar, this conifer of the Caribbean was relatively common on the islands of Saint Lucia and Barbados.

Regrettably, the tree was completely erased from Barbados, along with numerous other [native plants](#) and animals that have disappeared from that particular island as a result of widespread habitat destruction and the introduction of alien species. And as time went by, it also started to slip away imperceptibly on Saint Lucia—its final refuge.

Today, the pencil cedar is teetering on the very brink of extinction—almost literally in this case. By the time botanists became aware of the perilous position of the species, the entire global population was confined to a few mature specimens clinging to the picturesque peak of Petit Piton in south-west Saint Lucia.

It seemed as though the writing was on the wall for the pencil cedar. But Fauna & Flora International (FFI) hadn't read the script. Help was on hand for this juniper in jeopardy in the shape of an ingenious rescue plan sketched out in collaboration with the Global Trees Campaign.



View through pencil cedars clinging to the upper slopes of Petit Piton. Credit: Jeremy Holden/FFI

FFI is working with the Saint Lucia Forestry Department to propagate pencil cedars in its tree nurseries, with a view to replanting them in the lowland forests where they once thrived. A central plank of the strategy is to halt the proliferation of non-[native trees](#) that Saint Lucians have tended to favour at Christmas—particularly alien acacias and introduced varieties of cyprus tree, many of which are substandard and susceptible to disease.

By encouraging the public to buy nursery-grown potted junipers instead—and to plant out this superior substitute in their own gardens and farms once the festive season is over—the project aims to create a new Christmas tradition that will secure the future of Saint Lucia's native

tree by transforming it into an island icon.

What's the point of telling this story in mid-May? To put it bluntly, we need money. Due to funding constraints, the project team has had to put on hold its plans to start planting out juniper saplings in the wild in 2019.



Nursery-grown pencil cedars. Credit: Isabel Vique/FFI

Adams Toussaint, formerly chief [forestry](#) officer and now FFI's country manager and forest management adviser in Saint Lucia, is in no doubt about the importance of this conservation work: "It's a matter of national pride. Conservation awareness is on the increase here in Saint Lucia, and the people are desperate to save this unique species that is closely associated with the iconic landmark of Petit Piton."

There is no time to lose. Unless we look sharp, the pencil cedar is in danger of ending its days as a case study about missed opportunities and avoidable extinctions. Should we simply sit back and bide our time until the donations flow in from a more seasonally appropriate Christmas appeal? You can draw your own conclusions.

Provided by Fauna & Flora International

Citation: The mysterious case of the disappearing pencil cedar (2019, May 28) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-05-mysterious-case-pencil-cedar.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.