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Honeybush research for sustainable socio-economic benefits

The global demand for honeybush is high, as the plant is rich in antioxidants and contains many healing properties

Horticultural researchers are looking to reduce the harvesting of honeybush in the wild, as the practice risks making the indigenous plant species extinct. Currently, most honeybush on the market is still harvested from the wild. Horticulturalists have also cautioned that harvesting plants in the wrong way can prevent their regrowth.

The Department of Science and Innovation and the Agricultural Research Council continue to invest in research and development towards growing a lucrative honeybush sector. About 200 tons of honeybush are exported annually to 25 countries, including

Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Most of the rest goes to local cosmeceutical and nutraceutical industries, making it difficult for South African consumers to buy honeybush for their personal use.

Like rooibos, honeybush is unique to South Africa, growing in the Western and Eastern Cape. There are 23 known honeybush species, all belonging to the genus Cyclopia. The plant has many health properties. It is caffeine free, rich in antioxidants, and can assist in the treatment of cancer and diabetes.

South Africa is home to the Cape Floral Kingdom, which boasts 1 300 species per 10 000 km^2. The world's next most biodiverse area is the Amazon basin, with just 400 species per 10 000 km^2.

Very little research has been conducted to take advantage of the economic and health benefits South Africa's rich biodiversity, says Dr Cecilia Bester, a senior lecturer at Stellenbosch University's Department of Horticulture.

Bester has been investigating ways to grow the honeybush tea industry in South Africa for more than two decades. Her research focuses on breeding, horticulture and agroprocessing. The aim is to produce a better seed that will enable increased farming of the honeybush to meet the demand.

Currently the honeybush industry is still small, with a turnover of around R50 million per annum. The honeybush industry started about 25 years ago, with the plant being harvested in the wild. Dr Bester hopes to reduce harvesting in the wild.

"Ultimately, we want to have fewer people harvesting the wild grown trees because this might lead to extinction," says Bester. "The people who harvest the plant might not know how to do this sustainably. For instance, if you remove the plant material before the plant produces seeds, there will be no seeds left to grow again."

Dr Bester said years of research was starting to yield positive results.

"People are buying seeds from me; at this stage I am able to sell 20 kg of seeds a year."

Benefiting local communities is an integral part of the socio-economic approach to growing the honeybush industry.

Currently five communities from the Tsitsikamma, Storm River Bridge, Mossel Bay and Haarlem areas are being supported through a DSI funded honeybush project. The communities receive training in farming skills and business management.

Dr Bester said that the communities are implementing research outcomes.

"Communities are able to generate income for themselves by selling seeds to nurseries and private farmers."

The honeybush project falls under the DSI's Indigenous Knowledge-based Technology Innovation unit, which is contributing to the implementation of the national Bio-economy Strategy. The goal is to address poverty, unemployment and inequality directly.

Research and development around the expansion of the honeybush industry continues with the DSI and the Agricultural Research Council investing in projects aimed at benefitting the community.

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