

## **Going, going, almost gone . . . *Ex situ* conservation of almost extinct species in Kenya**

Len Newton

Department of Plant and Microbial Sciences, Kenyatta University,

P.O. Box 43844, Nairobi 00100, Kenya

ellyen@yahoo.com

Most of Kenya is arid, receiving less than 750 mm of rain *per annum*. The human population is rising rapidly, from under 2 million at the start of the 20th century to 33 million at the last census, in 1999. There is an increasing demand for land, for farming and for building homes, schools, etc. Consequently natural habitats are greatly disturbed, and some plant species are on the verge of extinction. In 1998 a botanical garden was established in the grounds of the Nairobi headquarters of the National Museums of Kenya. The first section to be planted up was an area of about one acre devoted to succulent plants. One corner is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Peter Bally, and planted with species named after him. The garden serves as a research facility and for educating the public, but is also important for the conservation of species that are highly endangered in the wild. The tree species *Euphorbia wakefieldii* (to 7 m high) is still plentiful but occurs only on a series of limestone outcrops in Coast Province. A large cement company is seeking a concession to use this limestone, in which case the plants will all be destroyed. Fortunately it grows well in cultivation. An even larger tree (to 25 m) is *Euphorbia cussonioides*, occurring in the highlands near Nairobi. It seems that only three mature plants remain in the wild, in an area already being encroached by development. Selfsown seedlings are often seen nearby, but they fail to grow to more than a few centimetres high, though they do grow on into trees when collected and grown in a garden. *Ex situ* conservation is probably the only hope for survival of these and some other species in Kenya.