

# A REPORT ON THE PORCUPINE QUILL TRADE IN SOUTH AFRICA



## Executive Summary

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in the number of porcupine quills and quill products on display in retail and décor outlets around South Africa. These products show a distinct and elaborate sophistication in design and are clearly being produced on a large scale to supply the growing trend towards Afrocentricism within the retail, décor, tourism and hospitality industries.

As we know that porcupines only shed their quills occasionally, it is not possible that these quills are being obtained through non-lethal harvesting in the veld. Many people have noticed this wide scale availability of quill products in South Africa and have expressed a concern about the possible negative impact that the quill trade must be having on the ecological integrity of the species.

This report has been commissioned by IFAW to explore every facet of the quill trade, in order to assess the extent and impact of the trade from a biological, conservation and human perspective.

The Cape porcupine *Hystrix africaeaustralis* is an Old World porcupine that occurs throughout the entire southern African sub-region, except in extremely arid areas such as the interior of the Namib Desert. They have a preference for environments that offer shelter during the day, as they spend the daylight hours resting in their burrows and then go out at night to forage for the bulbs, roots, tubers and other plant matter that comprise the bulk of their diet. Porcupines are monogamous animals and live in extended family groups consisting of an adult male and female and their offspring. Contrary to the popular opinion that as they are rodents they must breed prolifically, there is no evidence of a female having more than one litter per year within a free-ranging population, and one to four young, with an average of two, are born in a grass-lined chamber in the burrows during summer.

The porcupine is without doubt a controversial animal, in that on the one hand it plays an important role within localised biodiversity functioning by increasing bulb diversity in its diggings, and yet on the other hand it is generally perceived as being a problem animal within farming communities, where its eating habits have brought it into direct confrontation with farmers.

As the development of urbanisation and agriculture has intensified in recent years, natural habitats have been displaced, and this has had a very negative impact on porcupine populations throughout the country. One cannot assess the quill trade without first taking into account the negative image of the porcupine within an agricultural context, as it is on the farms that the wide scale hunting and killing of porcupines originated and continues.

Porcupines are drawn to areas where there is an abundance of food and this frequently brings them into the vicinity of crop farms and orchards and therefore into contact with humans. The porcupine's wasteful eating habit of biting into a vegetable and then discarding it, has

garnered considerable negative feelings towards the species amongst farmers. Porcupine burrows also create obstacles for farm vehicles, which lead to time-consuming and costly inconveniences to the farmer and the burrows also provide sanctuary for other perceived problem animals. As porcupines have strong incisors that are accustomed to biting through tough and fibrous plant matter, they are also able to bite their way through agricultural fencing, which is often costly to repair and creates access to other perceived problem animals such as jackals. In the arid regions of the country, porcupines are frequently known to bite through agricultural water pipes to gain access to water and this has created much antagonism towards the species.

All these factors have engendered a very negative attitude towards the porcupine and most farmers deal with the problem by encouraging the hunting and extermination of porcupines on their farms. Ironically, the localised killing of porcupines creates an ecological dynamic that compounds the original problem, as other females move into a territory when a dominant female is killed and when they start breeding, the number of porcupines in the area increases proportionately.

Although the porcupine's elaborate armament of quills and spines provides it with adequate protection from predation in the wilds, within a rural and urban context it has no defence against the impact of man. Porcupines are regularly trapped and shot at by irate farmers and in many rural communities, hunting parties consisting of farm labourers and packs of dogs regularly go out at night to hunt them. A soft spot on the forehead means that the animal is swiftly killed by a direct blow to the head. Once the porcupine has been killed, the farm labourers happily eat the meat, and the quills are either burned or discarded, or cleaned with disinfectant and then sorted into bundles, to be collected by porcupine quill dealers, who travel out to the farms from the cities. In recent years, with the growing increase in the aesthetic appreciation of quills, these dealers are known to encourage farm labourers to hunt porcupines specifically for the trade by offering them money or commodities and thereby providing a lucrative incentive to hunt them.

The quill trade originated through these indiscriminate hunting practices on the farms and today, one can obtain huge quantities of quills that are supplied to the retailers through dealers and black market operators. Quills sell from around R2.00 per quill in a retail outlet, to around R6,00 for a bundle of 12 quills through a dealer, which are usually sold in large quantities, ranging from 15 000 to 20 000 quills. Black market dealers can offer even greater quantities.

In South Africa, it is generally thought that the porcupine is relatively common and that the core population is stable. This assumption is not based on scientific analysis, as no studies appear to have been conducted to determine the impact of unregulated hunting on porcupine populations over the last few years. The species has no official classification and throughout the provinces, there is no enforced permitting structure in place to regulate the hunting of, or trade in, porcupines. The terms 'vermin' and 'problem animal' are generally applied to the porcupine and although it has been listed as a protected species in the draft Biodiversity Bill, it appears that most farmers will not respect this conservation status. Without collective compliance with the regulations set out in the Bill, the porcupine will continue to suffer extensive mortalities within farming communities.

In conclusion, it is evident from our investigations that porcupines are without doubt problem animals within the agricultural sector, and that they are killed without impunity as a result of this.

It is also evident that the retail industry is having a hugely negative impact on the species, in that it has placed an economic value on porcupine quill products, and at the same time has misled the public into believing that the quills used in the manufacture of these products are

obtained in an ethical manner. Many people who purchase quills through these stores will not question the origin of the quills or consider that their purchase is having a detrimental impact on porcupines by driving up the demand for quill products beyond the sustainability of non-lethal harvesting.

We feel that the widespread and often inhumane manner in which porcupines are killed needs to be addressed and we would strongly urge the relevant conservation authorities to initiate a study of porcupines within a designated study area, to determine the impact and effects localised hunting practices are having on these animals, as well as provide a regional estimate for the species.

We believe that, through a collective commitment to finding a working solution within the agricultural and retail industries, and through increased public visibility of the problem, we can reverse the negative impact of the last few years and find a more positive outcome for the future of the charismatic Cape porcupine.

**This report has been compiled by Belinda Ashton and Nick Chevallier**