

# OUR NATIONAL PARKS

## A Thorny Issue: Disappearing Cacti

(NAPSA)—Who would think that prickly cacti could be so popular? But the demand for these thorny plants is so high that they are rapidly disappearing from some of their former stomping grounds. Unfortunately, the demand is expressed through their illegal harvest. In fact, poaching has become such a common practice in the Southwest that in some areas, only a few cacti remain.

National parks, such as Big Bend National Park in Texas, provide crucial habitat to some of these endangered plants. One cactus, in fact, exists nowhere else. Only about 1,000 individuals of the Chisos Mountain hedgehog cactus remain and all existing populations are found within an arid, 30-mile subtropical area at Big Bend, the subject of a recently released State of the Parks® report issued by the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA).

NPCA is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to protecting, preserving, and enhancing the U.S. National Park System. The report points out that Big Bend encompasses more than 801,000 acres and is recognized for its rich biodiversity. Several federally threatened and endangered species find refuge in the park, including the Chisos Mountain hedgehog cactus.

“If this one population disappears, [the species] will be extinct,” said Joe Sirotnak, a botanist/ecologist at Big Bend.

Illegal collection of the cactus is the primary reason the species is endangered. “They’re popular because they’re rare and beautiful,” said Sirotnak.



**The once blossoming hedgehog cactus is nearly extinct.**

The short, round cactus is a reddish-maroon, becoming greener during summer. It typically grows between 10 and 12 inches tall. Luminous pinkish flowers begin to bloom on the cactus in March, and greenish-red fruits adorn the flowers. The flowers and their fruit are important food sources for pollinating insects in the park.

The cactus’ numbers also have dwindled because their habitat is disappearing. Changes in climatic conditions, especially the shift toward a drier regime, may also be affecting the cactus’ ability to reproduce.

Staff at Big Bend are monitoring two populations of the cactus and working to establish an experimental population in the park. Park staff are researching the species’ population genetics, breeding systems, pollination biology, and habitat requirements.

Obtain more information about NPCA, Big Bend, and the State of the Parks report by logging on to [www.npca.org](http://www.npca.org) or calling 1-800-628-7275.