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## Black market poachers coming for California's coastal succulents

The plants are popular and sell high in China and South Korea

By [BAILEY BEDFORD](#) |



A Dudleya plant in the wild. (Department of Fish and Wildlife)

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**BIG SUR** — Along California's coast, poachers are snatching up a natural resource and shipping it to black markets in China and South Korea.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife has been battling the poaching of wild succulents for overseas markets since 2017 with the help of concerned community members.

"These poachers are going through and ripping these plants out by the thousands and then packaging them up transporting them or shipping them, mostly to Korea and China, and then selling them for personal profit." said Captain Patrick Foy with the Department of Fish and Wildlife. "We have places where they have denuded the landscape in localized areas and ripped hundreds if not thousands of plants from a very small location."

The species being targeted are of the genus *Dudleya*, which generally grow on cliff sides and steep slopes near the ocean that lack enough water for most other plants. The species that is believed to be the most commonly poached is *Dudleya farinosa*, which is commonly known as "bluff lettuce" or "powdery liveforever."

According to published reports, the poached plants can sell for up to \$50 apiece in China or South Korea.



*Dudleya labeled for delivery and sales overseas.  
(Department of Fish and Wildlife)*

Stephen McCabe, emeritus director of research at the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum, has helped inspect recovered poached succulents. He notes these plants might be legally bought from nurseries in California for much cheaper but aren't particularly popular locally.

McCabe says about 10 years ago he interacted with three different groups from Korea that were after a different succulent — *Echeveria agavoides*, which is commonly known as ebony. He said all three groups were after every single ebony plant, or any similar looking plant, that they could buy to resell in South Korea.

"It's always hard to predict what's next," he said. "And it was kind of surprising that at this point *Dudleya farinosa* is kind of the 'it plant' among a group of people in Korea and China and probably a couple of other areas in Asia."

He has been told that part of the trend is for people to prefer older, more worn looking plants, which might help explain why the plants are not being supplied by Chinese and South Korean greenhouses.

"It would not be surprising if (the poached plants) were 50 to 100 years old, and maybe under commercial conditions you would get them there in 10 years," said McCabe. "But to mimic what they can just grab out of the wild would take a nursery a number of years."

The removal of large numbers of these plants impacts the environment by removing the stabilization they provide to the soil and giving nonnative plants an opportunity to take over the area, according to Foy. McCabe also noted that the succulents are important to other species in the ecosystem like bees and hummingbirds that get nectar from the succulents and butterflies that lay eggs on them. So, the effect of removing these plants ripples out through the environment.

In 2017 when the Department of Fish and Wildlife had their first case and realized this was a larger issue, it was new territory for them. They had previously dealt with poaching of other species like abalone and even of trees for firewood, but succulent poaching was something they hadn't seen before.

"We did not necessarily know what type of support we would get, how much support we would get from prosecuting attorneys, district attorneys' offices or even the public for putting these kinds of plant poaching cases together," said Foy. "What we have found is we have been overwhelmingly supported in our efforts to combat this new type of poaching."

In addition to normal patrols hoping to catch people in the act, the Department of Fish and Wildlife relies on tips from concerned citizens to help combat succulent poaching. Members of the public can report any

signs of poaching or polluting by calling 1-888-334-CalTIP. Callers may remain anonymous. Foy says one of the most useful details is the license plate number of the suspected individual.

Recently, two individuals, Guanrong Rivera, 49, and Jose Luis Rivera, 64, of Palmdale, were sentenced in Monterey County for illegally poaching succulents from Garrapata State Park. In their case, a picture of their license plate supplied as part of a tip that led to a residence where about 600 Dudleyas were eventually found inside the garage.

“The person who called us is 100 percent responsible for us making a very big Dudleya poaching case,” said Foy referring to the Monterey County case. “She actually called 911, which quickly got to us.”

Another option to report poaching or polluting is texting “CAL TIP”, followed by a space and the message, to 847411 (tip411). “One of the benefits of texting is we have had people give us tips and they are sitting next to the person they are tipping us on,” said Foy. “I had one case in my career where I had someone who was reporting a guy poaching an over limit of trout and he was standing next to him texting me and provided me all of the information as he was fishing.”

More information about CalTIP can be found at [www.wildlife.ca.gov/enforcement/caltip](http://www.wildlife.ca.gov/enforcement/caltip).

According to Foy, Dudleya poaching is a consistent problem. “It is not overwhelming us yet,” he said. “It is not going away; we know that for certain. There are people who are engaged in this activity. They are flying from Korea and China specifically to poach Dudleya and these are the worst of the actors we are attempting to stop or apprehend if possible.”

To try to combat this trend he has been reaching out to Korean and Chinese newspapers to inform people there that it is a crime in California and they will be prosecuted if caught collecting the succulents.

As a result of these cases, the state Fish and Wildlife Department has ended up with thousands of succulents in a warehouse. They work with botanists from the California Native Plant Society and UC Santa Cruz to try to replant the recovered plants into their native habitat. The researchers work to ensure that efforts to replant the succulents don’t hurt the environment. They identify specimens in order to return them to the correct location and to avoid replanting specimens that appeared to have been replanted, and thus could possibly have become infected with a fungus or other diseases foreign to the original environment. However, many of the plants are able to be returned to nature.

“The public support has been instrumental in motivating district attorneys’ offices to work with us and for our own personnel to put the time and effort in to make some of these more sophisticated cases,” said Foy. “The public support has been outstanding and appreciated.”