

Desire and the non-human: the illicit cactus and affective geographies of extinction

Authors: Jared Margulies*, *University of Sheffield*

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Mammillaria bertholdii is a tiny cactus with unique feathery spines. Bertholdii's habitat is limited to just one or two known locations of less than 20 km² in Oaxaca, México. It was first described by German taxonomists in 2013. Within a year of these publications, seeds and small grafted stock of these rare plants were for sale online and at cactus conventions in Europe. Given bertholdii's relatively slow growth, and cryptocarpic fruits (retained within the plant stem) it is certain individual plants and seeds were illegally smuggled out of Mexico prior to the species being described in the literature. In its earliest years, grafted bertholdii could fetch over 500 dollars or more per individual plant. The greatest threat (in habitat) bertholdii faces is from illegal collection in México. This paper is about desire and the non-human in the context of both extinction and abundance. What does it mean to desire a newly described species, and what can attention to desire, in the psychoanalytic sense, offer to post-human political ecology for thinking about the affective dimensions of politics mediating human relations with other life? My paper will draw on several months of fieldwork with conservationists, cactus collectors, law enforcement actors, and scientists in Europe and Mexico to explore the affective dimensions of endangered, 'lively' commodities in their global transit. I will approach theorizing desire in the context of non-human life as a means of advancing new paths for bridging post-humanist theory with political ecology's commitment to matters of inequality and injustice.