

Endangered trees now planted in Edinburgh

Critically endangered trees dubbed “living dinosaurs” because they existed 200 million years ago are to be planted in Edinburgh as part of a global bid to save their species from extinction.

The six Wollemi pines, which exist in the wild only in one gorge in Australia, have been shipped to the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE), where they will be planted in spring.

The Wollemi pine (*Wollemia nobilis*) was thought to have died out up to 90 million years ago until a small population of fewer than 100 trees was discovered by chance in 1994.

Growing in the remote gorge in Wollemi National Park, 150km from Sydney, the only known wild population is increasingly at risk from disease and wildfires.

New advances in genetic technology offer new hope for their future, however, by allowing botanists to breed genetically diverse Wollemi pines.

The young trees have been shipped to 34 gardens around the world, where they will form a “metacollection”, shared by several organisations with collaborative care and research, to establish a flourishing, genetically diverse global back-up population.

Dr Hannah Wilson, Head of the RBGE-based International Conifer

Conservation Programme, has overseen the six trees' arrival in Edinburgh.

Dr Wilson, who is currently monitoring the new arrivals in the Garden's quarantine unit in preparation for a spring planting, said the enigmatic species and its intriguing back story could "capture the imagination and inspire people to want to find out more about conifers and wider conservation objectives".

She added: "From fossil records we know these trees were living 200 million years ago alongside the dinosaurs and it was generally believed they had become extinct around 70 to 90 million years ago.

"Then, in 1994, Australian explorer and botanist David Noble abseiled down a remote gorge in the Wollemi National Park, New South Wales, and found himself amidst a small stand of living trees.

"Scientific research followed this amazing discovery, and the species has since been classified as critically endangered on the IUCN red list setting out the risks of extinction for plant and animal species."

The trees were discovered by Noble in a temperate rainforest wilderness area of the Wollemi National Park in a narrow, steep-sided, sandstone gorge.

Since Noble's discovery, there has been a concerted effort to safeguard the species against loss.

Dr Wilson added: "Australian plant science and conservation experts have succeeded in identifying and breeding genetically diverse Wollemi pines.

"This breakthrough makes it possible to create a metacollection, a botanical collection shared by separate organisations but cared for collaboratively to research and conserve the species.

“The six we have in Edinburgh will be planted out in April, in a public area of the Garden currently being prepared.

“Not only will they bring yet another important conservation element to our already comprehensive Living Collection, but they will also provide a valuable opportunity to engage with visitors about what the Wollemi pine is, the challenges faced by plants in their native habitats and the opportunities we are encountering as a result of improved genetic capabilities and the potential of metacollection initiatives.”

Alongside the RBGE, other UK collections involved in the international effort include Kew Gardens, RHS Gardens Wisley and Rosemoor, the Yorkshire Arboretum, National Botanic Gardens of Wales and Bodnant Garden in Conwy, North Wales.



Young Wollemi pine trees



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