

SAMPLING THE ICONIC AND DECLINING CEDARS IN THE CEDARBERG MOUNTAINS

Professor Mike Wingfield, founding Director of FABI and Prof. Brenda Wingfield, SARCHI Chair in Fungal Genetics, in August joined Stellenbosch University colleagues Prof. Francois Roets, Dr Casper Crous and Dr Gabi Kietzka to sample *Widdringtonia cedarbergensis* in the Cedarberg Mountain Range of the Western Cape. This investigation followed a preliminary survey that Mike undertook in 1984 and 1985 together with Drs Sharon von Broembsen and Pat Manders, the results of which were published in the South African Forestry Journal (now Southern Forests) in 1987. At the time of that first survey, DNA-based techniques for the identification of putative fungal pathogens were not available. The survey conducted during the latter part of August 2020 sought to re-collect fungi associated with the declining trees.



Although the team recognizes that the decline of these trees is unlikely to be due to a single biotic cause, (there is good evidence that fire is one of the major drivers) it remains of interest whether microbes contribute to the overall problem. The team collected samples in the hope of isolating the yeast *Cryptococcus wingfieldii*, collected by Mike from samples in the area in 1984 and 1985. This yeast (originally described by the late and famous zymologist Prof. Johannes van der Walt as *Sterigmatomyces wingfieldii*) and for which only a single living culture is available, is a close relative of the important human pathogen *Cryptococcus neoformans*. Additional collections of *C. wingfieldii* are considered to hold important keys to better understanding the origin, evolution and biology of *C. neoformans*.