Wrestling With The Jaws of Extinction

*An in-depth Essay on the dangers Venus Flytraps face*

Audience: Folks unaware of the current poaching issue taking place in Wilmington, North Carolina and Botanists who are unaware of this developing issue.

Tone: I want readers to feel the concern I have for the continued growth of these plants in the wild. I want readers to understand that I'm factual and I'll give other arguments credit, but I can explain what they might be unaware of.

Answer: My paper answers the question of, 'How are Flytraps being poached in the wild affecting the plant?'

Thesis: The Flytrap faces extinction at the hand of poachers, construction firms taking away their habitat, and lack of federal protection.

The Venus’ Flytrap is a plant that has awed generations since its discovery in 1768 by Daniel Solander. (*1983: Plants That Eat Animals*). But what is it about this plant that makes it so unique? This plant isn't reliant solely on photosynthesis, but rather obtains its nutrients through the nitrogen found within insects crawling along the ground of the swamp (*1983: Plants That Eat Animals*). The plant, jaws agape with the illusion of refreshing nectar looming inside its teeth, waits patiently for an unsuspecting insect. In the blink of an eye, the plant forcefully shuts, trapping the unlucky insect within its dangerous domain. It is then that the plant will start the long process of digestion, feeding on everything the insect has to offer.

The Venus’ Flytrap is an exotic and unique plant, native only to the shores of Wilmington, North Carolina. Known best for its tooth-like leaves that chomp on the unfortunate insect that enters its domain, the Flytrap is truly in a world of its own when it comes to the various types of plants that exist. One would imagine people would marvel at the sight of it in the wild, sitting low to the ground, waiting for the next victim. However, the Flytrap has become a victim itself, enclosed within the jaws of three major enemies, desperately fighting for survival. The Flytrap faces extinction at the hand of poachers, construction firms taking away their habitat, and lack of federal protection.

The Venus’ Flytrap has certain traits no other plant in the world possesses. For example, according to *1983: Plants That Eat Animals,* Venus’ Flytraps are triggered as a result of an insect hitting one of the three hairs located on the trap twice. Immediately following this action, the trap encloses the bug within its domain, slowly digesting the insect over the course of a week. The traps are only native only to soils free of minerals. Bogs provide the perfect habitat because they are comprised of sphagnum moss, which contains almost no minerals. They feed off insects in order to get nitrogen and other chemicals needed for continued growth. There are only a handful of plants that feed off insects, but there is no other like the Venus’ Flytrap.

The growth conditions for the Venus’ Flytrap are rare, found only in bogs and swamps with mineral free soils. While there are swamps that exist around the world, the Venus’ Flytrap exists in one specific location. Their original habitat lies in Wilmington, North Carolina. They take up only 70 miles of swamp strewn across Wilmington. This is an extremely narrow region for them to exist, so they already face limited space. The Flytraps are not abundant either, as only a few thousand grown naturally in Wilmington. The numbers may seem large at this point, but according to the North Carolina History Project, only 35,000 remain in the bogs of Wilmington! The amount of plants being stolen has reached a dangerously high number, and at this rate, Venus’ Flytraps could face extinction from their native habitats within our lifetime.

This spells bad news for the world of carnivorous plants, because as previously mentioned, Flytraps will not grow anywhere else in the world. Stanley Rehder, author of *The Venus’ Flytrap Only Grows in These Parts; Punish Poachers Severel*y, wrote, "these rare carnivorous plants have long been a target of poachers, but the penalty for getting caught with an illegal plant has not deterred thieves such as the ones who dug up more than 1,000 flytraps from the Stanley Rehder Carnivorous Plant Garden behind Alderman School in May" (Rehder 1). It's obvious that the poachers feel the risk is well worth the reward. The penalties that poachers faced in 2013 were only minor. As Stanley Rehder pointed out in his article, poachers face a Class H penalty if caught, which can be anything from a minor fine to a few hours of community service.

So what has changed since Rehder wrote his article in 2013? Well, according to FT Norton's 2015 article, *First Felony Charges Filed over Venus' Flytrap Thefts,* four poachers faced bail amounts of $15,000 and more as a result of being caught. These four men stole around 900 Venus’ Flytraps over a weekend in January of 2015. According to Norton, "the men were arrested about 4:30 p.m. Saturday at the Holly Shelter Game Land by N.C. Wildlife Resource Commission Officer Fred Gorchess. Gorchess said the plants were found stuffed inside a backpack, an overnight bag and a pillow case" (Norton 1). This marks a big stepping-stone for stopping poachers from stealing these unique plants. With increased bail amounts and increased charges for poachers, poachers are deterred from attempting such large heists. The continued use of increased charges will halt the current operations of poachers stealing these plants and selling them on eBay.

In an interview with Matt Miller of FlytrapStore.com, he brought up some great points on the increasing issue of poaching. The first question asked was if he'd noticed increasing competition selling Flytraps because of poachers. He said, "Not really… The 'typical' Venus’ flytrap isn't one we sell many of and that is what people poaching from the wild would obtain." What he means is that although the Flytrap only exists as one species, the plant has been bred to grow in various colors, shapes, and sizes. This only exists through tissue culturing, which is an artificial process. The plants in the wild can't do this naturally so they remain the same shape, size and color.

There's one other factor that is also leading to the demise of the Flytrap. Miller claims, "I believe habitat destruction to be the real threat to wild Venus’ flytraps. Thankfully there is a large national forest (Croatan) where they can live mostly undisturbed. But much of their habitat has now been bulldozed for building human habitat. The more space we can preserve for flytraps, the less likely it will be that they go extinct in the wild." So even though poachers are less of a threat than they were a year ago, we are now facing large companies taking swamp lands and converting them to concrete forests, void of the exotic life once held there. Like Miller said, the Croatan National Forest provides a safe habitat, but we really need more room for them. We are encroaching too heavily on their native land.

Venus’ Flytrap poaching is an increasingly dangerous problem that needs a solution fast. With more cases of poaching that involve large numbers of flytraps never seeing the natural bogs of Wilmington, it has quickly become a dire issue in North Carolina. One of the bigger questions raised is, 'how will the extinction of Venus’ Flytraps effect their native habitat?' The truth is somewhat confusing at this point, and the answer is that we really don't know. According to Miller, "Obviously there are far-reaching implications any time a species goes extinct in the wild, but they often aren't understood for many years to come." So while at this point we're not sure what will happen to the bogs if the Flytraps are removed, the question to ask is why let it come to that? As Miller said, in most cases there are far reaching conclusions that exist at the extinction of a species. What if the Flytrap contains a disease killing enzyme that only exists naturally within it, and it’s no longer available due to extinction? Perhaps the Flytrap has controlled a population of bug that will become rampant following their demise. This could affect the life around the swamp, or perhaps even in a worst-case scenario effect humans whom now face more uninvited insects. Why should we wait to find out if these possibilities can become reality?

While it has only ever made minor headlines in Wilmington's daily news, this is an issue that should be addressed nationwide. Few charities exist to help these plants, and the majority of people have no idea how difficult it is for these plants to grow naturally. Nothing would be worse than to see the last native Flytraps in the world be violently uprooted at the hands of a bull dozer mechanic, or being dragged away in a pillow case. Hopefully the issue of Flytraps will one day make national headlines, causing a national movement to end the poaching of these exotic plants. Public apathy will be the demise of the Flytrap. Why should we let such a unique plant vanish?

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