

Project Update: March 2006

The genus *Saintpaulia* - the African Violet - hosts the most popular and globally significant plant species endemic to the biologically rich Eastern Arc Mountains in East Africa. *Saintpaulia* is a unique genetic resource of economic importance for the global horticultural industry and a potential tourist attraction in Tanzania. Many of the 20 known species are endangered, due to the destruction of the forest where they grow.

The Finnish *Saintpaulia* Society launched a project in 2003 with an overall goal to conserve the African violet species in the East Usambara Mountains and adjacent lowlands in Northeastern Tanzania. The specific objectives of the first project phase were to map the distribution of the species, to assess the suitability of *Saintpaulia* localities for ecotourism, to assess the conservation status, to collect samples for conservation genetic studies, to draw public attention on the conservation of *Saintpaulia* and to strengthen collaboration between researchers, local institutions and private sectors to support long-term conservation of this important plant. Field work was conducted by an international team from August 2003 to January 2004. About sixty *Saintpaulia* localities, representing ten species, were documented. It was found out that the genus is not in a great danger in the four forest blocks studied in the East Usambara Mountains, because most of the forest is protected, and because there are plenty of suitable habitats for *Saintpaulia*. However, populations on the forest edges are threatened by human disturbance, fires, drought and too much light. Along the lowland rivers Mkulumuzi and Zigi, where only small patches of forest remain, *Saintpaulias* are extremely threatened all populations being very fragmented and suffering from light and drought.

Currently, the Amani Nature Reserve is the best area to see African violets in the wild because of the existing visitor facilities and because there are several accessible localities comprising different species. Many of the *Saintpaulia* localities elsewhere in the East Usambara could also serve as tourist attractions, but some basic infrastructure and marketing will be needed to attract visitors in new areas.

Successful in situ conservation of *Saintpaulia* will need to have a multidisciplinary approach with both biological and socio-economical aspects taken into account. Biological conservation will include measures such as monitoring, restoration and management of the populations and the habitats. Education and development of livelihoods of the local people will be needed to reduce pressure on the *Saintpaulia* habitats and to integrate local people in conservation. Ecotourism is the most promising option for a sustainable nature-based income in the East Usambara area.

Please visit our website (www.saintpaulia.fi) or contact Johanna Kolehmainen (johanna.kolehmainen@helsinki.fi) for more information on this project and the Finnish *Saintpaulia* Society.

