C403 on The Rock

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The author revisits Gibraltar Botanic Gardens to check on some *Lithops* he donated six years ago. Photos by the author except where otherwise stated.

In September 2023 I was able to revisit the Gibraltar Botanic Gardens (The Alameda) (Fig. 1), where in 2017 I donated a number of *Lithops olivacea* var. *nebrownii* plants. These were seedlings raised from seed harvested from legally collected C403 habitat plants by Professor Desmond Cole. The locality, near Aggeneys, was visited during one of the latter-day Cole field trips and Des kindly gifted seed to me in 2015. I mentioned my Gibraltar Botanic Gardens donation in a guest editorial published in the April 2017 issue of the *Mesemb Study Group Bulletin*, and at that time I intended to return much earlier than I did. A combination of factors (Covid included) had kept me away, and although a few dead specimens hinted at past challenges, overall, I was very pleased with what I found when eventually I got there.

Whilst not the type species, I consider *L. olivacea* var. *nebrownii* an ideal subject for a botanic garden, not least because it is named at varietal rank in honour of Dr Nicholas Edward Brown, creator of the genus *Lithops*. One of a range of var. *nebrownii* body colours stated in *Lithops - Flowering Stones 2005* is pale apricot, and this, combined with whitish facial flecks, make for an understated but pleasing combination. The yellow flowers with white centres are also quite striking when they unfold in the late afternoon sunshine.

At the Gibraltar Botanic Gardens, the *Lithops* are not housed in the main outdoor areas accessed by the public, since such small plants would be at the mercy of children who occasionally rampage through the flower beds, even ones inhabited by spiky cacti. Rather, they are housed undercover, together with an array of other succulents within the propagation zones that are locked up after hours. However, access to see them is easily arranged via one of the garden staff.

Conspicuous by his absence on this occasion was the long-standing curator Andrew Gdaniec. In recent years

▲ Fig. 1 A general view of the Gibraltar Botanic Gardens (Photo: C Debra Green)

▲ Fig. 2 *Lithops olivacea* var. *nebrownii* at the Gibraltar Botanic Gardens

Andrew has done so very much to upgrade the gardens, but has now moved on to concentrate on a botany PhD. I wish him well.

Growing in volcanic lava granules imported from Spain, the plants of var. *nebrownii* before me (Fig. 2) were reminiscent of specimens I had previously seen in

▲ Fig. 3 *Lithops olivacea* var. *nebrownii* in habitat

I was impressed by the vast majority of *Lithops* I saw there, which were of compact, low growth, complete with dried up, sun-protecting old skins. There were plenty of seed capsules too, albeit with possible hybrid content. Although the potential for a controlled pollination programme clearly exists, it has yet to be done and currently there appears to be nobody at the garden to do it.
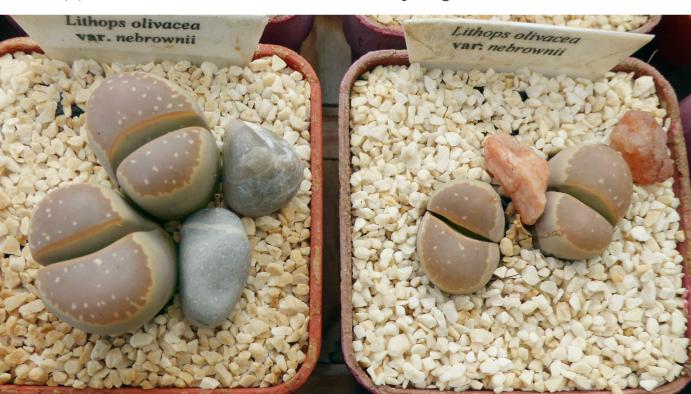
Whilst I am sure the Gibraltar Botanic Gardens will be maintained as a tourist attraction well into the future, such activities, together with the long-term care of some rare and choice plants, currently seem uncertain. Ultimately, specialist knowledge and the funding for such is required from those who govern the wider territory. Let us hope the authorities continue to look favourably on the botanic gems they host on The Rock.

habitat (Fig. 3), which is quite an accolade for their care. As on location in the Northern Cape, it was sometimes necessary to peer between the dried leaf remains to see properly the beauty of the plants. Unlike the two double-headed specimens that I kept back for myself in 2017 (Fig. 4), these donated subjects had increased to 3, 4, 5 or even 6 heads.

LITERATURE:
Cole, D T & Cole, N A (2005) *Lithops Flowering Stones.* Cactus & Co.
Green, K (2017) Guest editorial. *Mesemb Study Group Bulletin* **32** (2): 26.

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▲ Fig. 4 *Lithops olivacea* var. *nebrownii,* two plants in the author's collection