

PLIGHT OF THE ST HELENA OLIVE

by Trevor W. Hearl

The plight of the sole remaining St Helena Olive (*Nesiota elliptica*) is a sad setback in the fight to save the Island's endemic flora. The very last of this unique species is dying and, except a miracle, in a few more years another Island plant will be extinct. Nothing illustrates more dramatically the importance and urgency of the present conservation program. It can't be left to miracles.

The attempt to rescue St Helena's Wild Olive will not fail for want of trying, however. Until 1977 it was thought to be extinct already, perhaps a victim of clearance for growing flax, although a century ago a dozen or more trees grew on the northern side of the Ridge. "This handsome indigenous plant", wrote J.C. Melliss in 1875, "attains to a stout shrubby tree about 15 to 18 feet high [...] (with) small, pink-tinted blossoms". Ironically, he said that it "seeds well". But Melliss also gave the name Wild Olive to another tree, leading to confusion in recent years over the identity of the St Helena Olive. Thus P.W.T. Henry in 1974 described *Nesiota elliptica* as forming "dense thickets" (Forestry on St Helena, p. 31), but Agricultural Officer R. O. Williams discovered that this was *Elaeodendron papillosum*. Identification was made no easier by the fact that the St Helena Olive is not a true olive (*Olea*), types of which abound on the Island.

The present solitary tree was found in 1977 by George Benjamin, the Island's Conservator Extraordinary. Perhaps the species might be rescued after all. But alas, cuttings and seedlings have failed to survive.

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