# Nara: Unique melon of the desert

***The nara, a valued food source for thousands of years in the Namib, holds promise for wider use in other arid areas.***

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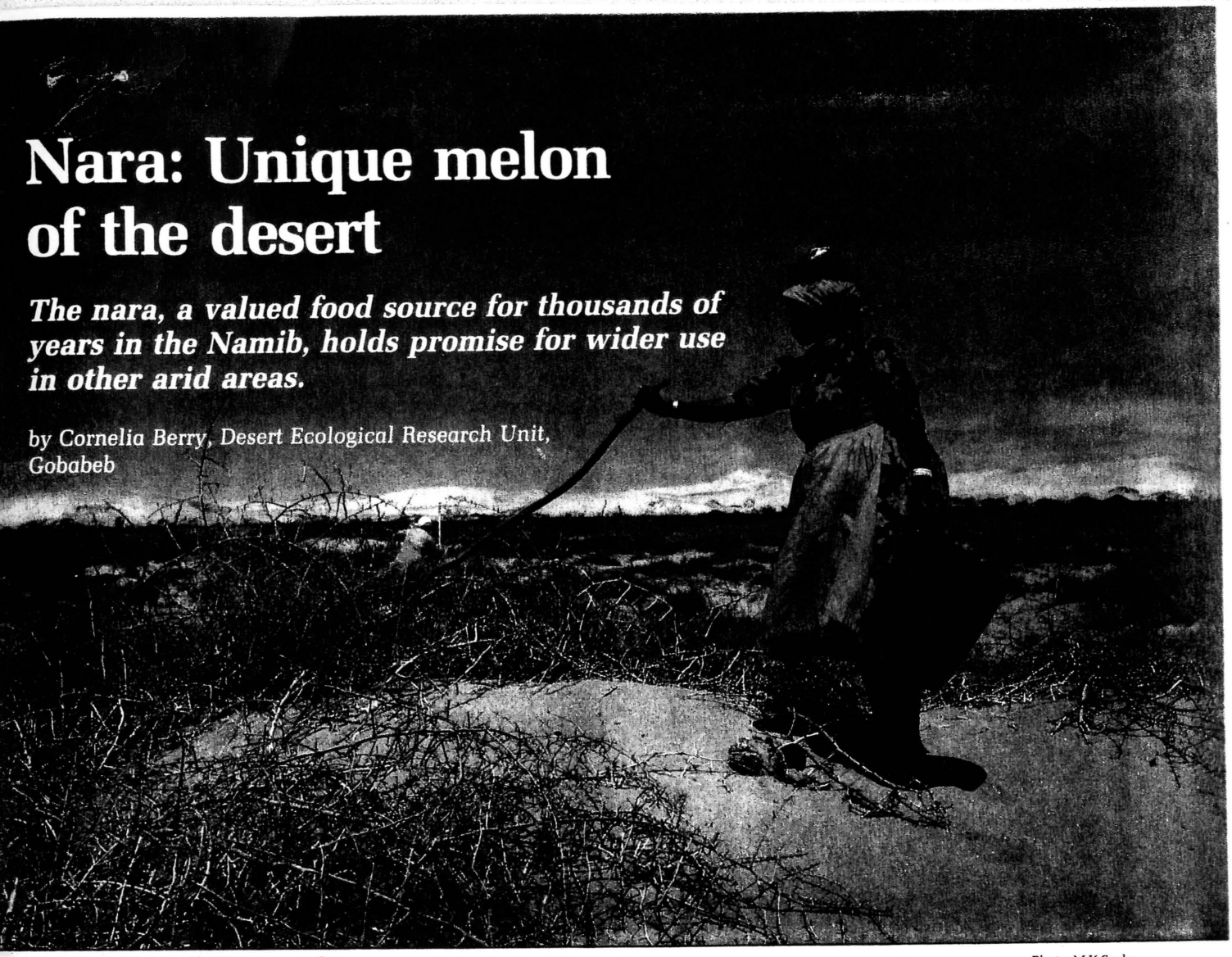

**Topnaar woman collecting nara melons.** Photo: M K Seely

The nara, *Acanthosyscios horridus*, is endemic to the Namib and is one of its most characteristic plants. It is a member of the cucumber family and its specific name, "horridus" probably refers to the sharp thorns and the plant's ability to grow into impenetrable spiky thickets.

Nara occur in a long, narrow, coastal belt from Mossamedes in southern Angola to Port Nolloth, south of the Orange River. Fossil evidence suggests that nara existed some 40 million years ago.

**Where does it grow?**

Plants grow up to 1.5 m high, forming tangled thickets. Some nara, estimated to be over 100 years old, cover an area of approximately 3 000 square metres. The root of one very old living plant measured 40 cm in circumference. Because their long tap roots reach underground water supplies, the nara plant can survive without rain for many years. It has adapted to desert conditions with leaves modified to resemble thorns so that water loss is minimised. These thorns and stems contain chlorophyll and have taken over the photosynthetic role from the defunct leaves. Adapted to sandy habitats, nara occur on the banks of dry river beds, on slip faces of dunes as well as in the interdune valleys. When a seedling emerges, the wind blows sand up against it to form a small dune. As the sand heaps up, the plant keeps growing above the sand so that hummocks of up to 5-10 m in height are formed, thus stabilising the sand. Underneath the plant, sand becomes compacted by droplets of fog falling from the branches, and this compaction provides ideal conditions for gerbils and geckos to make their burrows.

Nara are dioecious, with male and female flowers borne on different plants. The male flowers are produced in profusion throughout the year. They are greenish-yellow, cup-shaped, about 3 cm in diameter and have 5 petals. The female flowers are similar, but are easily distinguishable from the males by having swollen fruiting bodies below the petals. These flowers and the entire plant play an important role in providing shelter and food to a variety of Namib fauna. In a recent study near Gobabeb, a large plant measuring about 18 × 13 m was fenced off and pit traps were placed inside the enclosure. Over a period of 8 weeks, a total of 2 221 tenebrionid beetles (*Onymacris plana*), 150 tenebrionids belonging to 9 other species, one side-winding adder (*Bitis peringueyi*), one legless

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