

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES  
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA

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Eighteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties  
Geneva (Switzerland), 17-28 August 2019

CLARIFICATION AND FURTHER JUSTIFICATIONS FOR THE INCLUSION  
OF THE MULANJE CEDAR (WIDDRINGTONIA WHYTEI) IN APPENDIX II,  
IN RESPONSE TO THE SECRETARIAT'S RECOMMENDATIONS

This document has been submitted by Malawi in relation to proposal CoP18 Prop. 50.\*

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\* *The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CITES Secretariat (or the United Nations Environment Programme) concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.*

## 1. Executive Summary

The Mulanje Cedar (*Widdringtonia whytei*) is a critically endangered and emblematic species endemic to Malawi. The Appendix II listing proposal presented by Malawi (CoP18 Prop 50), for the consideration of the CITES Parties at CoP18, presented some of the essential elements necessary to understand the critical situation of the species. Unfortunately, certain key elements were still missing or unverified at the time of the submission of the proposal, and for this reason they were not included. Over the past eight months, Malawi has continuously and relentlessly reached out to the vast majority of the domestic and international experts in the biology, ecology and trade of the Mulanje Cedar. The result of this national effort is the present document that intends to clarify certain elements of the proposal and offer an answer to the Secretariat's recommendation regarding the listing of the Mulanje Cedar on the Appendix II of the Convention. Specifically, the present contribution demonstrates: (1) that the *Widdringtonia whytei* meets the criteria in Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP17) Annex 2(a) for its inclusion in Appendix II in accordance with Article II, paragraph 2(1) of the Convention; (2) that the international trade has been an important driver of the illegal and unsustainable harvesting of Mulanje Cedar trees in the wild, despite Malawi's effort to control the trade in the species and punish offenders; and (3) the strong determination of Malawi, the sole cedar's range State, to see its national tree internationally protected and international trade properly controlled.

## 2. Background Information

Mulanje Mountain is the second highest mountain in southern Africa rising to over 3,000 metres. It is a forest reserve (473 km<sup>2</sup>) which contains over 70 endemic plants. The most famous of these is the endemic Mulanje Cedar (Figure 1), *Widdringtonia whytei*, which is highly threatened and close to extinction<sup>1,2,3</sup>.



**Figure 1. Image of a Mulanje Cedar Tree with a view across Mulanje Mountain in southern Malawi (Credit: Julian Bayliss).**

The rate a decline of the Mulanje Cedar has probably been the most dramatic of all species within Malawi in recent years. Historically the Mulanje Cedar was found across the Mulanje Massif practically in all of the gorges and basin areas. In colonial times it was grown commercially for its wood as it is poisonous to termites and also does not rot easily. In 1985 it was declared the national tree of Malawi by His Excellency Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda<sup>4</sup>.

According to the Forest Act it is illegal to harvest live Mulanje Cedar and quotas were given on an annual basis to harvest the dead standing trees (which were often as a result of fire).<sup>5</sup> The Mulanje Cedar is now included as a Listed Species under the new National Parks and Wildlife (Protected, Endangered, and Listed Species) (Declaration) Order 2017, punishable with an immediate custodial sentence, no option of a fine, and up to 30 years imprisonment<sup>6</sup>.

However, in recent years the management situation on Mount Mulanje deteriorated and widespread illegal logging of the Mulanje Cedar went unchecked. For more information about the species (biology, ecology) and the regulations in place in Malawi to protect it, consult CoP18 Prop. 50 submitted by Malawi.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Secretariat's Comments

According to CoP18 Doc. 105.1 Annex 1 (sentences underlined by Malawi):

"Conclusions

*Widdringtonia whytei* is a critically endangered species endemic to Malawi, with a small population size and extremely limited distribution, and there has been a marked decline in the population size in the wild in recent years. It thereby meets the biological criteria for inclusion in Appendix I.

However, the species is considered economically extinct, and only a few young seedlings remain in the wild that will take decades to mature.

However, international trade is not a driver of the decline of the species. Trade in timber from wild sources will not occur for decades to come, and paragraph 3 h) of Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP17) resolves that species of which all specimens in trade are artificially propagated should not be included in the Appendices if there is a negligible probability of trade taking place in specimens of wild origin. Trade in other specimens, such as seeds and seedlings, might become of interest, and a precautionary approach could thus be warranted. However, identification of seeds and seedlings in trade would pose challenges with various look-alike species.

Recommendations

*Widdringtonia whytei* does not meet the criteria in Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP17) Annex 2(a) for its inclusion in Appendix II in accordance with Article II, paragraph 2(a) of the Convention.

The Secretariat recommends that this proposal be rejected."

In the following paragraphs Malawi will clarify several elements that were missing or inadequately presented in CoP18 Prop. 50. The information presented in this document is the result of the increased effort by Malawi to reach out to a vast array of specialists over the past months in order to address the areas where information was insufficient, inexistent or unverified at the time the proposal was submitted.

### 4. Status of the Populations of *Widdringtonia whytei*

According to the available information, the Mulanje Cedar population is composed of three elements: rare trees in the wild, hidden stockpiles and plantations.

### Trees in the Wild

A survey in 2014 found 63,747 standing mature trees out of which 38,138 were alive and 25,609 were dead. A repeat survey in January 2017 found only seven trees remaining.<sup>8</sup> A subsequent survey in February 2018 found that all of these trees had been removed and there were now zero mature Mulanje Cedar trees left on Mulanje Mountain. Thus in little over three years some 63,747 trees were illegally harvested for domestic and international trade (see section below).

A recent report (2019) from the District Forestry Officer (DFO) for Mulanje Mountain Forestry Reserve stated that illegal loggers are still being observed carrying cut trees in the form of planks down from Mulanje Mountain. These must be previously inaccessible trees that have been missed by the survey efforts or hidden stockpiles.

The DFO also reports that some individuals and companies have been exporting Mulanje Cedar planks to Asia and the Far East but data is not available as the trade is illegal and therefore difficult to monitor.

YEAR	ITEMS					
	Planks	Beams	Door Frames	Frames	Pieces	Number of cases
2008	327	246	0	0	8	26
2009	1008	2	40	0	269	20
2010	296	4	49	0	0	15
2011	104	114	2	197	27	40
2012	569	33	12	25	0	23
2013	195	101	57	116	0	32
2014	0	23	61	0	0	11
2015	0	4	454	0	0	13
2016	0	32	28	0	0	4
	2499	559	703	338	304	184

**Table 1. Mulanje Cedar Cases and Confiscations in Mulanje District (Source: DFO, 2019)**

### Hidden Illegal Stockpiles

Stockpiles of illegally sawn Mulanje Cedar planks are sometimes encountered and the location of several of these illegal stockpiles is known to the authorities. Trucks loaded with Mulanje Cedar planks are also sometimes stopped at police roadblocks across the country. However, widespread corruption by the judiciary normally means the perpetrators are released with a small fine and without a charge, and the wood is thereafter impounded by the Forestry Department.

### Nurseries and Plantations

The purpose of the plantations is to safeguard future populations of Mulanje Cedar in different locations across Malawi. Populations planted outside Mulanje can be used to re-stock Mulanje Mountain with Mulanje Cedar whenever necessary, as is the current case (Figure 2a&b). Such plantations maintain genetic diversity especially as the original seed was collected from different localised populations of Mulanje Cedar on Mulanje Mountain in the first instance.



**Figure 2 a&b. Images of nurseries of Mulanje Cedar on Mulanje Mountain (Credit: Julian Bayliss).**

There are currently several populations of Mulanje Cedar which were planted between five to more than 110 years ago. The exact locations of these populations are not to be disclosed for security reasons.

In the Northern Region there is a plantation covering 76.6 hectares. At the plantation in the Northern Region, the Mulanje Cedar were first planted in 1951. They were thereafter intermittently planted on at least ten occasions until the present day. These plantings varied in the number of saplings planted. Collectively they cover an area of 76.7 hectares of various heights and ages depending on when they were planted.

In the Southern Region there is also an area of Mulanje Cedar covering 66.2 hectares. At the plantation in the Southern Region, the Mulanje Cedar were first planted in 1907. They were thereafter planted intermittently with at least 15 documented planting events over the last 100 years until the present day. These planting events varied in the number of saplings planted. Collectively they now cover an area of 66.2 hectares of various heights and ages depending on when they were planted (Figure 3a&b).



**Figure 3 a&b. Images are of planted Mulanje Cedar stands of various ages at the southern site (Credit: Julian Bayliss).**



On Mulanje Mountain, as of 2017/2018, approximately 400,000 Mulanje Cedar saplings have been planted across the mountain. These are still at a young age and less than five years old. On Mulanje Mountain there have been many planting attempts over the years with variable success. Often the Mulanje Cedar saplings germinate with great success, and survive well initially after planting out, but then die after approximately five years for no apparent reason. When they do survive beyond this stage, they are often killed by frequent fires which ravage Mulanje Mountain on annual basis or uncontrolled illegal harvesting. The Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust annually planted many tens of thousands of Mulanje Cedar saplings across Mulanje Mountain since the start of World Bank GEF funding in 2002, however very few have survived. Control of illegal harvesting driven by national and international demand and of fire frequency are vital to improve the chances of survival of the Mulanje Cedar saplings on Mulanje Mountain.

## 5. Threats to Harvestable Trees

In 2017 one of the most significant reviews of wildlife legislation was passed in Malawi, the new Wildlife Regulation “The National Parks and Wildlife (Protected, Endangered, and Listed Species) (Declaration) Order 2017”. In this Order the Mulanje Cedar was listed under “Part 3. Listed Species of Wild Plants, Fungi, and Animals. A. Plant and Fungi Species. 3) Any plant or fungi species listed below: *Widdringtonia whytei* – Mulanje Cedar, Mulanje Cedarwood, Mulanje Cypress”

Inclusion in this Order made it illegal to possess and export Mulanje Cedar. If caught a person can be charged with a custodial sentence, with no option of a fine, and that custodial sentence could be up to 30 years. Authorities such as the police, Department of Public Prosecution, and Lilongwe Wildlife Trust are all eligible to prosecute through this Order under the National Parks and Wildlife Act.

The rate of illegal harvest of the Mulanje Cedar from Mulanje Mountain is well documented and testament to the very high demand for the timber from this species, and the high levels of corruption involved in its removal, which have facilitated its demise. In little over three years some 63,747 trees were illegally harvested. This illegal and unsustainable felling of the Mulanje Cedar was principally driven by domestic and international demand.

The Mulanje Cedar is highly desirable as the sap (resin) is toxic to most insects, and therefore the wood is not eaten by termites, which is a unique feature. The sap was in the past extracted as an insecticide. Moreover, the wood has such a high resin content that it also does not rot. On Mulanje Mountain the cut stumps of very old trees are still visible decades after the tree was removed.

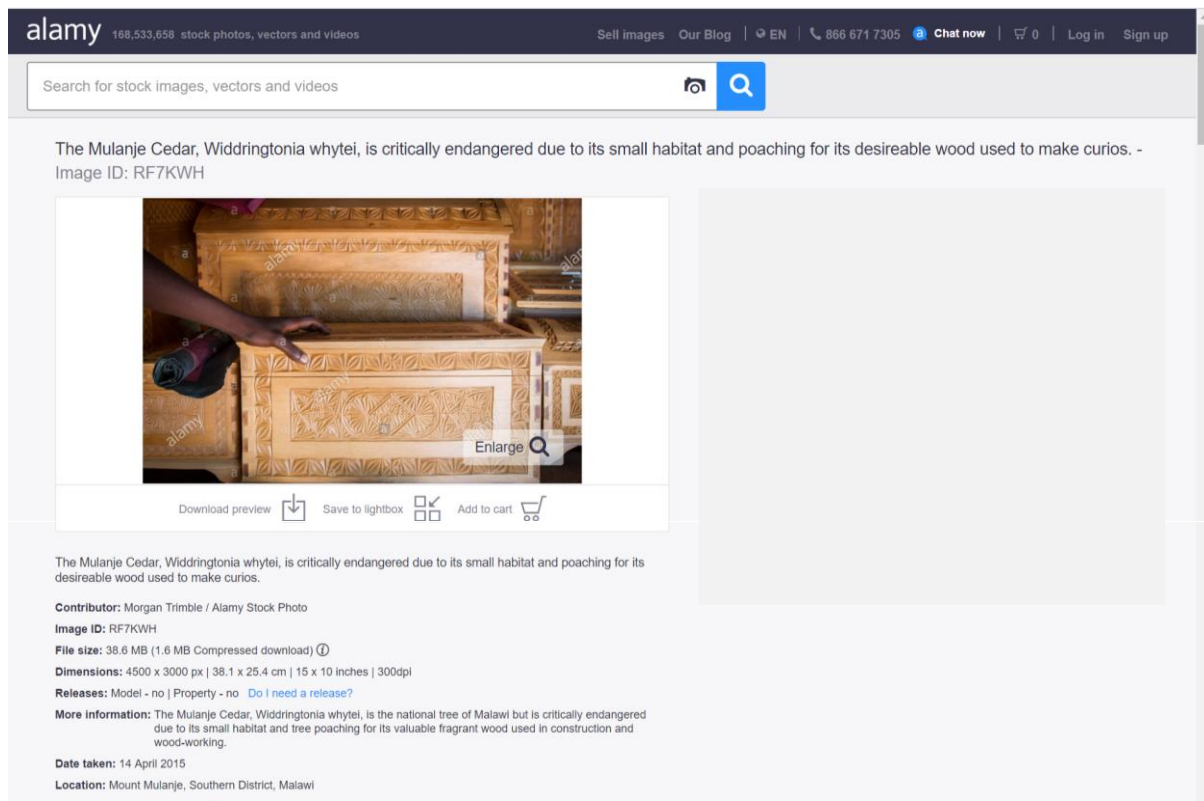
The Mulanje Cedar is exported either as sawn planks (on trucks or in shipping containers), or in the form of arts and crafts – the infamous ‘Cedar box from Malawi’. These are commonly found for sale in craft shops across the region especially in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zambia; and have also been found as far south as South Africa (Figure 4). Mulanje Cedar arts and crafts are regular for sale on Ebay.

Desk studies demonstrate the existence of international trade in this very rare and sought after species. As an example, a seller in South Africa states that he has Mulanje Cedar planks in stockpiles with the following description (Figure 5):

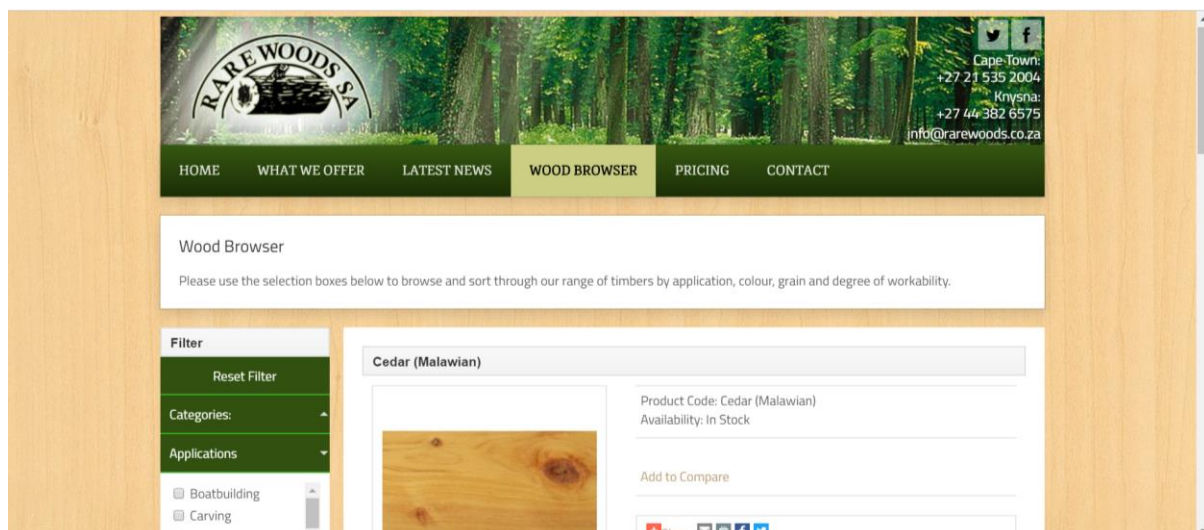
“Description and uses:

Also called Mlanje Cedar. Identical to our own Clanwilliam Cedar from the Cedarberg, and also under threat. Not allowed to be harvested except under strict control. We are lucky to have obtained our legally sawn stock some years ago. A lovely timber to work with, but difficult to finish, due to the natural oils it contains. A feature of the planks is the names scratched on them in charcoal by the

workers who carry the planks down the mountain. Planks are cut at just the right dimensions for one man to carry them unassisted, and they obviously have an immense pride in their work. We are privileged to be able to offer this wood, while stocks last.”<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 4. Box made of Mulanje Cedar available for sale, destined to the international consumers (Source: Screen capture from alamy webpage available at: <https://www.alamy.com/the-mulanje-cedar-widdringtonia-whytei-is-critically-endangered-due-to-its-small-habitat-and-poaching-for-its-desireable-wood-used-to-make-curios-image233123901.html>)**



**Figure 5. Mulanje Cedar on sale in South Africa (Source: Screen capture from the Rare Woods SA website, available at: <https://www.rarewoods.co.za/wood-browser/cedar-malawian>)**

It has also been noted that young cedar trees have been cut for construction purposes in some of the plantations on neighbouring Zomba Mountain. If not controlled this will threaten these stands and also enable Mulanje Cedar poles to enter the international market.

## **6. An Emblematic Tree for Malawi and its People**

As clearly stated by the Hon. Minister Binton Kutsaila for Natural Resources, Energy and Mining, the Mulanje Cedar is part of Malawi's national heritage and a source of national pride (see Appendix 1). Traffickers have circumvented, through clandestine schemes, the strong measures taken by the government of Malawi and the information available indicates that these operations were principally driven by the international demand for this extremely rare and valuable timber.

International trafficking has been an obstacle to the enormous efforts deployed by the government and its international partners to protect the species and restore populations. Recently a conservation programme has been commissioned to try and save the Mulanje Cedar entitled 'Save Our Cedar'. This is a joint effort between the Department of Forestry (DoF), Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI), Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust (MMCT), the Forestry Research Institute of Malawi (FRIM), and the United States Forest Service (USFS). The project has now established 10 community nurseries and planted approximately 200,000 seedlings back on the mountain since the start of 2018 from seed.

## **7. Conclusion**

The threat of illegal harvesting to supply the illegal trade in this species is still very real and alive. Domestic efforts by the government and its international partners need the support from all CITES Parties to save and restore this national natural heritage. The inclusion of the Mulanje Cedar on Appendix II of the CITES will help monitor, control, and also prevent the unsustainable commercial international trade of this species. It is the wish of the Government of Malawi that this species is added to Appendix II and a formal request is made for international assistance to help prevent this species from becoming extinct in the wild.



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- <sup>1</sup> Chapman, J.D. (1995) The Mulanje Cedar. Malawi's National Tree. The Society of Malawi, Blantyre, Malawi.
- <sup>2</sup> Strugnell, A.M. (2002) Endemics of Mount Mulanje – the endemic spermatophytes of Mount Mulanje, Malawi. *Systematics and Geography of Plants*, 72, 11–26.
- <sup>3</sup> Bayliss, J., Makungwa, S., Hecht, J., Nangoma, D. & Bruessow, C. (2007) Saving the island in the sky: the plight of the Mount Mulanje cedar *Widdringtonia*. *Oryx*, 41, 64–69.
- <sup>4</sup> Chapman, J.D. (1995) The Mulanje Cedar. Malawi's National Tree. The Society of Malawi, Blantyre, Malawi.
- <sup>5</sup> GoM 1997. Forestry Act. Ministry of Mines, Natural Resources, and Environmental Affairs.
- <sup>6</sup> GoM, 2017. National Parks and Wildlife (Protected, Endangered, and Listed Species) (Declaration) Order 2017 (Government Notice #70) National Parks and Wildlife Act.
- <sup>7</sup> For more information about the biology, ecology and regulations in place, consult the Appendix II listing proposal submitted by Malawi and available at:  
<https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/cop/18/prop/19032019/E-CoP18-Prop-50.pdf>. Consulted on August 5, 2019.
- <sup>8</sup> Chanyenga, T. (2014). A report on Mulanje Cedar Assessment on Mulanje Mountain – prepared for MMCT. Forestry Research Institute of Malawi.
- <sup>9</sup> For more information consult the Rare Woods SA's website. Available at: :  
<https://www.rarewoods.co.za/wood-browser/cedar-malawian>. Consulted on August 5, 2019.

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## Appendix 1. Letter of support from Hon Minister of Natural Resources Energy and Mining for Malawi

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MINISTRY OF NATURAL RESOURCES,  
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### MINISTER FOR NATURAL RESOURCES, ENERGY AND MINING

**Ref. No. MNREM/C/06**

31<sup>st</sup> July, 2019

Tom De Meulenaer,  
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**SWITZERLAND**

Via email: [tom.demeulenaer@cites.org](mailto:tom.demeulenaer@cites.org)

Dear Sir,

#### **18<sup>TH</sup> MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES TO THE CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE, TO BE HELD FROM 17<sup>TH</sup> TO 18<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST IN GENEVA**

On behalf of the people of the Republic of Malawi, I would like to convey my best wishes for a successful 18<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) which is taking place in Geneva from 17-28 August 2019.

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## Appendix 1. Letter of support from Hon Minister of Environment for Malawi

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We are aware that the period for comments is closed, but considering the importance of the listing to save and protect our treasured Mulanje cedar (*Widdringtonia spp*), I would not like to miss this opportunity to seek your support and that of the Convention for Malawi's proposal. This letter will also be annexed to an information document that will be submitted soon, by Malawi.

Mulanje cedar is a national heritage for Malawi, which grows naturally only on the Mulanje massif in Southern Malawi (572km<sup>2</sup>) and nowhere else on earth. It is a commercially desirable species due to high levels of its fragrant sap which is poisonous to termites and prevents the timber from rotting. Such a wood is highly prized for use in construction and long-lasting artifacts. In 1984, Mulanje cedar was given a national status as "**Malawi's National Tree**" by the Head of State. Unfortunately, due to over-exploitation and other ecological factors, the species is now critically endangered and no mature trees exist in its native ecosystem. Only a few young trees are found in some protected government plantations from which seed is being collected as part of a conservation afforestation program.

Efforts by the Malawi Government to restore the species involve an increase in law enforcement to stop harvesting of the remaining trees, protecting natural regeneration and enhancing tree survival in the native sites. Of late, communities and stakeholders have been engaged to establish plantations throughout the country. The major threat to these efforts however is harvesting of trees for timber, curios and other wood artifacts most of which have markets in Europe, Asia, the Far East, USA and other regions of the world. A lot of these products are exported illegally, and hence are largely unrecorded.

I would like to convey to the Convention our belief that monitoring and regulating international trade in Mulanje cedar wood products through listing in CITES Appendix II will support Malawi Government's conservation efforts and the enhanced protection of

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this species. The Mulanje Cedar is on the edge of extinction and the people of the Republic of Malawi need all of the national and international support to help save this species, and we urge the Convention to support our request to place the Mulanje cedar on CITES Appendix 2 before it is too late.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shumma' or similar, with a stylized, cursive script.

**Binton Kutsaila M.P.**