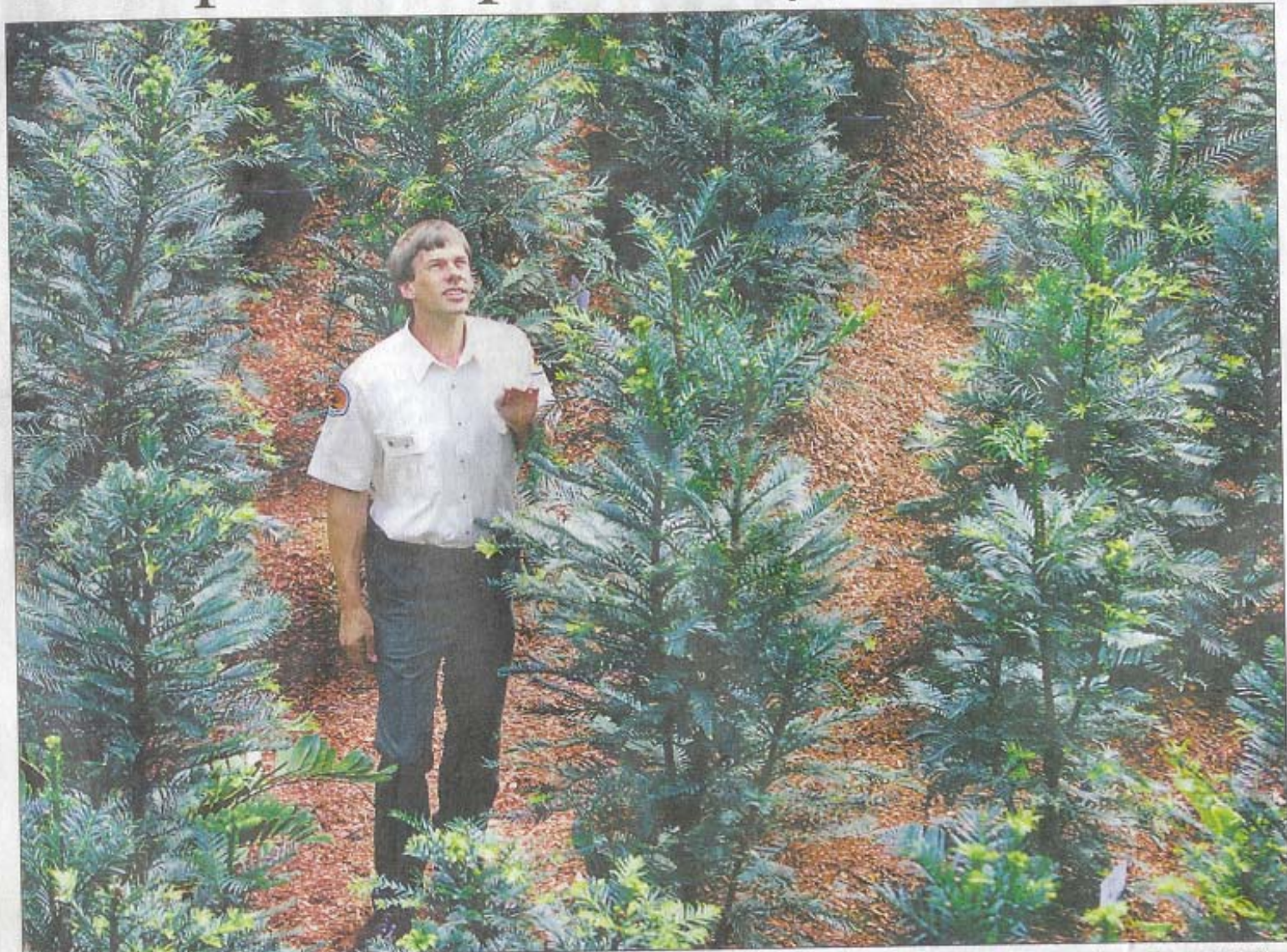


Your piece of prehistory, for a price



Wondrous find: David Noble, who discovered the Wollemi pine 11 years ago, gazes at a group of the plants in Sydney's Botanic Gardens yesterday

Picture: Brett Faulkner

Jonathan Porter

THEY have been described as botany's *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

Now you can own one of the first Wollemi pine saplings to hit the market, by stumping up as much as \$25,000.

On October 23, Sotheby's will auction 292 six-year-old saplings grown from cuttings of parent trees in NSW's pristine Wollemi National Park.

The pines are a member of the Araucariaceae family, which existed alongside the dinosaurs 200 million years ago.

Bidding will start between \$1500 and

\$2500, but a Sotheby's spokeswoman said they could fetch 10 times that amount, or \$7.3 million for the lot.

Most of the money will be used to secure the habitat of the original stand, in the heart of the 500,000ha Wollemi National Park, 100km northwest of Sydney, which has been shrouded in secrecy to protect the trees.

A National Parks and Wildlife Service spokeswoman did not rule out the need "to post a guard if interest in the area becomes a problem".

The remainder will be spent on conservation projects around the globe, including protecting threatened species.

Sotheby's Australia chairman Justin Miller said there had been "a lot of interest internationally" in the plants.

"We have had inquiries from Japan and Germany," Mr Miller said.

But he expected many of the plants would go to "patriotic Australians".

"It has that feel of discoveries of the 18th and 19th centuries. It is fascinating and people want to own something that was thought to be extinct until 10 years ago," he said.

They are quite easy to care for and can thrive in direct or partial light in temperatures from -5C to 45C and can grow as high as 40m.

Park ranger David Noble, who discovered the Wollemi pine, backed the effort to safeguard the plants with proceeds from their sale.

Mr Noble, who found the ancient stand while canyoning by himself in 1994, said it was important to protect the area from disease.

"The one in the Sydney Botanic Gardens has already come down with a bug, which is being treated," he said.

A spokeswoman for Wollemi Pine, the nursery which has grown the cuttings, said the sale was designed to "commercialise an endangered species in order to save it".