

# INDIAN VIRTUAL HERBARIUM, BIGGEST DATABASE OF COUNTRY'S FLORA, IS A GLOBAL HIT

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

With details of about one lakh plant specimens, the Indian Virtual Herbarium, the biggest virtual database of flora in the country, is generating a lot of interest and turning out to be an eye-catching endeavour. While herbarium specimens are considered important tools for plant taxonomy, conservation, habitat loss and even climate change, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has recently described the Indian Virtual Herbarium as an example of how digital tools can help us connect to our roots.

In the *Mann Ki Baat* episode on July 31, Mr. Modi spoke about the novel initiative, and said that the herbarium was an interesting collection of plants and preserved parts of plants. "The virtual herbarium also presents a rich botanical diversity of the country. I am convinced that the Indian Virtual Herbarium will turn out to be an important resource for research on plants in the country," he said.

Developed by scientists of the Botanical Survey of India (BSI), the herbarium was inaugurated by Union Minister of Environment Forest and Climate Change Bhupendra Yadav in Kolkata on July 1. Since then, the portal [ivh.bsi.gov.in](http://ivh.bsi.gov.in) has had nearly two lakh hits from 55 countries.

Each record in the digital herbarium includes an image of the preserved plant specimen, scientific name, collection locality, and collection date, collector name, and barcode number. The digital herbarium includes features to extract the data State-wise, and users can search plants of their own States, which will help them identify regional plants and in building regional checklists.

The portal includes about one lakh images of herbarium specimens. BSI Director A.A. Mao said that by 2022-end, the number of digitised species will increase to two lakh.

"By 2024, we plan to provide a platform to all the herbaria in the country so that they can display their herbarium collection on the platform," Dr. Mao said.

Scientists say that there are approximately three million plant specimens in the country which are with different herbaria located at zonal centres of the BSI and at the Central National Herbarium at Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Indian Botanic Garden at Howrah in West Bengal.

"Work on the digitisation of the specimens started in 2019, and most of the digitisation has been done by the BSI. About 52% of our type specimens are from foreign nations and collected from 82 countries of the world during the British-era," Kumar Avinash Bharati, scientist, BSI said.

The Indian Virtual Herbarium is also deeply linked with the botanical history of the country. The portal provides most valuable historical collections of botanists like William Roxburgh, Nathaniel Wallich and Joseph Dalton Hooker, considered the founding fathers of botany in India.

The digital herbarium has some of the oldest botanical specimens dating as early as 1696. *Cyperus procerus* was collected between June 15 and 20, 1696, near Chennai. The oldest type specimen *Lepidagathis scariosa* was collected in 1817 by Robert Wight. Type specimens are those collections that help in new discoveries and are considered of great significance by botanists and taxonomists. Researchers need to examine the types of the names in order to

confirm their identities. As a priority, the Indian Virtual Herbarium has digitised information with images of 29,615 type specimens on its platform.

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