

59 PLANT SPECIES IN IUCN THREAT CATEGORIES

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development & EIA

Threatened wildlife is not just about tigers but numerous plants too. Recently, scientists identified the threat status of 59 Indian plant species based on criteria used by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), in the hope that this “streamlines” conservation efforts for the plants.

Quantifying threat levels of species can be crucial for their conservation. For instance, funding agencies often consider the threat status of species provided in IUCN's Red List (a catalogue of the world's threatened species), to sponsor research and conservation activities to save them. Around 2,700 plant species in India are at risk but very few have been assessed by the IUCN, according to Dr. S.K. Barik, Director of Lucknow's CSIR-National Botanical Research Institute.

To bridge this gap, Dr. Barik and experts from several institutes prioritized 59 plant species that are at risk of “elimination” if the threat levels they face are not assessed soon. They assigned each species a threat status based on IUCN criteria.

This included the extent and area of each plant's geographical range, which revealed that 10 species are critically endangered, 18 endangered, six vulnerable, five near threatened and one species each are data deficient and least concern.

The threat levels of some plants have been altered as a result; for instance the palm *Bentinckia nicobarica* is currently listed as endangered; however the new study suggests it is critically endangered based on its distributional attributes (the palm is reported only from the Great Nicobar Island).

Based on population sizes and numbers of mature individuals remaining in the wild (using field surveys that also revealed that habitat loss was a huge factor affecting many declining plant populations), the team classified 10 species as critically endangered, three as endangered and five as vulnerable. Germination tests in the laboratory also suggest that factors such as low seed viability could have caused declines in the wild too.

The study initiated in 2012 to assign threat status to select plants, is published in *Current Science*. The study also generated data on 38 species that have never been assessed by the IUCN.

“We hope IUCN will take this assessment into account while updating their Red List,” said lead author Dr. Barik.

“Yes, IUCN will take into consideration this published information when these species do come up for assessment,” confirmed Dr. N.M. Ishwar, programme coordinator of IUCN-India, by email.

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