

Cycas circinalis: ‘living fossil’ with a deadly twist



A plant species found only in Western Ghats faces threat of extinction

A plant species that has outlived the dinosaurs, the *Cycas circinalis*, a ‘living fossil’ found only in the Western Ghats, faces the threat of extinction due to the over-harvesting of its leaves for commercial purposes.

While there are nine species of *Cycas* found across the country, almost all of which are classified as being endangered, the *Cycas circinalis*, found at altitudes between 1,500 and 1,800 meters, has traditionally been used by tribal communities for a variety of purposes. In the Nilgiris and other parts of

the Western Ghats, where the plant is found, the seed is sometimes soaked in water (to remove a strong poison contained within) and ground into flour, after which it is eaten, while the seed is also said to be used in traditional, indigenous medicine.

However, over the last few decades, the leaves of the *circinalis*, which are used for ornamental purposes like for setting up ‘pandals’ have been harvested in bulk from the remaining plants, often leading to them becoming stunted and unable to reproduce and increase in number.

With a single leaf costing as much as Rs. 25, the economic incentive to completely strip the plant of all its leaves in one harvest remains high for many people.

Shiny Miriam Rehel, Programme Co-ordinator for the Biodiversity Restoration Programme at Keystone Foundation, speaking to *The Hindu*, said that *circinalis* plants do not grow in large numbers in the wild, and the over exploitation of the leaves from the plant has caused a further decline over the last few decades.

The Keystone Foundation has been trying to promote the conservation of the species by encouraging forest-dependent communities to sustainably harvest the leaves from the *circinalis*. “We collect the seeds from the wild and raise it at our nursery on the Keystone campus. We then encourage farmers and tribal communities to grow the plants near to their dwellings or land holdings,” said Ms. Rehel, who added that the conservation of the species needs to be assured through working with local communities, creating awareness of sustainably harvesting the leaves and ensuring that the plant itself remains healthy.

Speaking of their importance, Ms. Rehel said that not only does the conservation of the endangered *circinalis* important to protect the livelihood of tribal communities, but also for biodiversity.

She said that the *circinalis* is an ideal host plant for ants, cupid butterflies and bats, and added that their protection was a vital aspect of protecting the ecology of the Western Ghats in the long run.

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Shiny Miriam Rehel,
Programme Co-ordinator,
Keystone Foundation