

Botanists on a Mission to Save an Endangered Plant

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Scientists at the Malabar Botanical Garden and Institute for Plant Sciences, Kozhikode, have taken up a mission to save an endangered aquatic plant facing extinction in its only known natural habitat in Periya village, Kasaragod.

The plant, *Crinum malabaricum* and known locally as Kanthanga, is restricted to a population of approximately 1,000 along the shaded stretch of a seasonal stream running through the village.

The IUCN Red List of Species has classified *C. malabaricum* as critically endangered. According to Richard Lansdown, Chair, Freshwater Plant Specialist Group, IUCN, the trees lining the stream were being cut down for farming and access, pushing the aquatic plant to the verge of extinction. It is highly likely that the remaining population will be lost unless some form of control is imposed or an area demarcated, within which the trees should not be cleared, the Red List assessment says.

Botanical Garden Conservation International, a UN-led conservation network, has requested the MBGIPS to take steps for the conservation of *C. malabaricum*. Scientists from the institute who visited Periya found the stream polluted with household wastes.

Director, MBGIPS, R. Prakashkumar has written to the panchayat, seeking help in conserving the habitat. "It is a desperate attempt to save the plant from extinction," he says.

The institute has submitted a Rs.15.5-lakh proposal to the IUCN for financial assistance to take up ex-situ conservation of the species on its campus. The programme involves collection of seeds from the field and their germination in special pots in controlled conditions. The germinated plants would be allowed to multiply freely. The proposal also includes in vitro multiplication.

"Once sufficient seedlings are procured, they will be planted in the aquatic garden on the campus by preparing a stream to simulate their natural habitat," says Dr. Prakashkumar. The institute also has plans to introduce the seedlings to nearby streams.

The proposed measures include an awareness campaign for local people and protection of the stream with the help of the panchayat.

Endowed with large, flat, strap-shaped leaves, *C. malabaricum* resembles a water lily. "This may be the reason why it had not been noticed by regional botanists," said S.R. Yadav and M.M. Lekhak from the Shivaji University, Kolhapur, who reported the discovery of the plant as a new species in 2012.

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