

Botanists! Just think for a while

It is now a general consensus that plants are of utmost importance for maintaining the ecological balance in nature. Many ecologists and environmentalists have advocated for the protection and conservation of plants, particularly endangered species. Many NGOs actively participate through afforestation and prohibit poaching of valuable trees and herbs.

While there is much talk about felling of timber-yielding trees because its loss is easy to detect through the thinning of forests, the practice of uprooting plants and collecting other plant materials during excursions for botanical studies in various colleges and universities is often overlooked.

Educational tours for the students of botany are meant for getting acquainted with plants and studying their morphology, structure and habitat where museum specimens will not do. Some institutions resort to sending students to hilly places where cryptogams are abundant, as some plants are not found in the plains. Such a venture can be appreciated in that a student can get a clear idea about the ecosystem of a particular place as well as study the concept of plant communities and their ecological niches.

At present, there is a curriculum in

universities to submit plant materials. In order to do this, students collect specimens indiscriminately.

While we may know something about economically important trees and plants described in textbooks, we know little about rare, wild herbs.

One should pay heed to the contribution of plants to a particular ecosystem while also emphasizing the ecological impact they have.

Some endemic species seem very attractive to students solely for their submission purpose. Consequently that small place becomes devoid of that species. It is my own experience in the case of *Isoetes* sp. and *Ophioglossum* sp. Well-known habitats of these plants have become almost barren. Some locals of Jatapahar of Panchmari, Madhya Pradesh prohibit excursion personnel to collect the endangered *Psilotum* sp. We become conscious and cautious only when a particular species is declared endangered and is unfortunate to have a place in the red data book. Often this declaration is made after a species is almost extinct.

Personally, I have observed the gradual reduction in the number of tree ferns *Cyathea* sp. and *Alsophila* sp. from 1972

to 1999. These tree ferns, besides being very beautiful, are also very rare.

These are only some examples to show how we exploit nature for our interest. The selection of specimens in the syllabus of botany students can be better framed. Names of plants can be taught while on field trips or through illustrations and for the practice of describing the plant, material can be selected from the dominant flora of that place. 'Once you collect one, then grow two' should be the motto and should include material native of that place which are cultivated extensively in that area. Some Agra and Jodhpur-based companies injudiciously collect material from Western Himalayas and supply them to different colleges and universities in India and abroad. These include some which are highly valuable for medicinal purpose, e.g. *Ephedra* sp. and *Taxus* sp. As a teacher, a modification in the syllabi is my plea to the concerned authorities regarding the collection procedure of plant material.

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