

Forest dept uncovers species dating back to prehistoric era in Dantewada forest

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Raipur: The forest department recently identified a rare and ecologically significant forest patch in Bacheli forest range of Dantewada forest division, which extends to the Gangaloor forest range of Bijapur district in Bastar division. This unique forest is found to be home to several ancient plant species, which date back to prehistoric times, possibly even the dinosaur era.

The department envisions integrating this discovery into its plans for sustainable eco-tourism, positioning Chhattisgarh as a prime destination for nature lovers and researchers alike, officials said.

Situated at an altitude of more than 1,242 metres above sea level, this forest is classified as a subtropical broad-leaved hill forest (Forest Type 8). Notably, this may be the highest-altitude forested hill in Chhattisgarh, officials said.

In India, 16 types of forests are found. While the state is primarily known for its moist and dry deciduous forests (Forest Types 3 and 5), the recent finding introduces a new ecological dimension. The area is regarded as a 'Living Museum', preserving plant species that date back to prehistoric times, possibly even the dinosaur era. Some plant species identified here are believed to have been recorded in Chhattisgarh for the first time, development and planning additional PCCF Arun Kumar Pandey, who led a three-day survey, told TOI.

This discovery underscores the intricate layers of biodiversity that have persisted for millions of years, surviving significant environmental changes. It enriches Chhattisgarh's ecological narrative and serves as a testament to

the resilience of nature, preserving life through millennia, he said. A team of ecologists and forest officials were also present during the survey.

The team included IFS probationers S. Naveen Kumar and Venkatesha M.G., renowned scientists Dr Rajendra Prasad Mishra, Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) deputy director and M.L. Nayak, former HoD at School of Life Sciences at state-run Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University in Raipur. Devyani Sharma and Anurag Gupta from the forest department were also part of the team.

During the survey, the team documented an wide variety of rare and ancient plant species, including *Alsophila spinulosa* (tree fern), *Gnetum scandans*, *Ziziphus rugosus*, *Entada Rheedei*, various *Rubus* species, *Canthium dichocuum*, *Ochna obtusata*, *Vitex lucoxylon*, *Dillenia pentagyna*, *Macherenja sinensis*, and *Ficus cordifolia*.

The *Macherenja sinensis* species is possibly found exclusively in this forested hill region of Chhattisgarh. These discoveries underscore the rich, untapped ecological potential of Chhattisgarh's forests, the additional PCCF said.

PCCF V. Sreenivasa Rao praised the discovery, noting, "CM and forest minister, both deeply connected to tribal forest areas, have consistently championed the exploration and protection of Chhattisgarh's rich biodiversity."

Additional PCCF described the finding as a milestone in the state's biodiversity research. He said, "This forest patch opens a new chapter in our understanding of Chhattisgarh's ecological wealth. The department is committed to promoting and protecting such unique regions, and we are confident that this discovery will attract global scientific attention to the conservation value these areas hold."

Dr. Rajendra Mishra, an expert in biodiversity, emphasised the distinctiveness of this forest region, stating, "The vegetation here bears a striking resemblance to the flora found in the Western Ghats. Like the Kanger Valley forests, this area is rich in diverse species. Furthermore, the lack of anthropogenic pressure has allowed these species to thrive undisturbed."

This finding presents significant opportunities for further research and eco-tourism development. The forest department plans to conduct more in-depth surveys to explore the region's hidden biodiversity. By sharing these

findings with the broader scientific community, the department aims to bolster conservation efforts and raise awareness of Chhattisgarh's unique ecological heritage.