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Western Ghats' species with Himalayan cousins

Ananya Dutta | TNN | Jan 4, 2016, 09.49 AM IST

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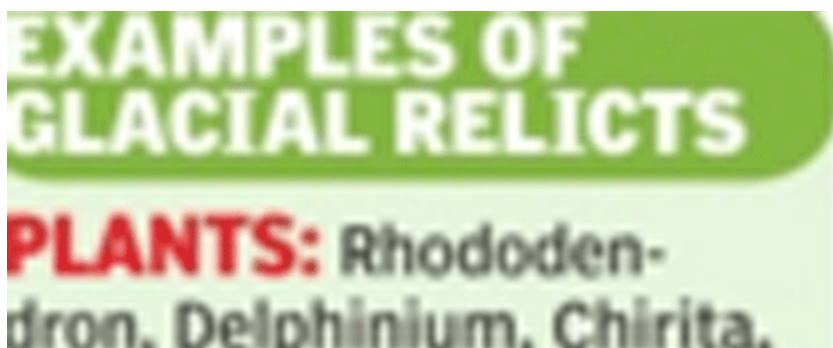
PUNE: In the Nilgiris, Annamalai and Palani hills of the Western Ghats one can find the bright red flowers of the Rhododendron arboreum plant, the only rhododendron in the 1,600 km mountainous stretch.

Right across the subcontinent, the Himalayas are home to nearly 90 species of rhododendrons including a different sub-species of the one found in the Western Ghats.

The marvel is that two closely related species of plants are found in two different ends of the Indian subcontinent. It could be, as some scientists suggest, the rhododendron found in the Western Ghats is a Glacial Relict - plants and animals that have survived from the ice age in a given territory because of particularly favourable conditions found in a micro-habitat.

"There are many plants, animals, birds and even insects that are found in the Western Ghats, with their closest relatives found thousands of km away in the Himalayas or even further in Southeast Asia. The occurrence of these temperate flora and fauna on isolated hilltops in southern India has been explained by several theories," Sachin Punekar, founder president of Biospheres, said.

One of the commonly held theories about the occurrence of the species is that they are remnants from the last glaciation event. He explained that within a long-term ice age, there are intermediate phases of cold climate called "glacial periods" alternating with warmer climate called "interglacial periods."



Corallo-discus, etc.

ANIMALS: Tahrs, Martens, Macaques, etc.

BIRDS: Frogmouths, Fairy-bluebirds, etc.

MOLECULAR STUDIES

Studies at the molecular level have shown that the Lion-tailed Macaques that are endemic to the Western Ghats are more closely related to the Pig-tailed Macaques found in the Himalayan region than other macaques such as the Rhesus macaques found in Central India

Sachin Puneekar, founder president of Biospheres, pointed out that such studies have so far been carried

but on only three species of plants that are suspected to be glacial relicts.

"There is a vast scope for greater research in this area. It will reveal not only a lot more information about unique species that are often not found elsewhere in the world, but also about the evolution of the flora and fauna of India," he said.

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The species found in the Western Ghats with close links to those found in the Himalayas are believed to be from the Pleistocene epoch which lasted from over 2.5 million years ago to 11.7 thousand years ago, he added.

The rhododendron is far from being the only species in this list. Delphinium malabaricum is another species of flowering plants that is endemic to the Western Ghats. Other plants of this genus are not found anywhere in central India, but it makes a reappearance in the Himalayas and then further north in Eurasia, Punekar said.

"As far as animals are concerned, it is quite clear that the Nilgiri Tahr found in the southern Western Ghats is closely related to the Himalayan Tahr with a large gap in WUNDER between. Similarly, the NilgiWESTER ri Marten is the only species of marten found in southern India, but it is similar to the Yellow throated marten found in the Himalayas," Punekar said.

Scientists have proposed several reason for the similarities in the flora and fauna found in the Western Ghats and the Himalayas. It is widely believed that the formation of the Himalayas by the collision of the Indian subcontinent with the Eurasian mass had a major impact of the on the mon GHATS soon pattern, he explained. It is possible that prior to e formation of the Himalaya the formation of the Himalayas to the north, there was a prevalence of tropical evergreen forests across this landmass. However, repeated glacial and inter-glacial periods coupled with tectonic activity and changes in the monsoon pattern led to a shrinking of the typically wet forest cover, he said.

The narrow stretch of the wet zone in southern Western Ghats, thus has more in common with the Himalayas than the forests in the dry zone of Central India, he explained. "Often, when such fragmentation of habitats occurs different species evolve according to the local environmental conditions. Thus different, but closely related species evolve in different geographical regions," Punekar said.

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