



FACT SHEET

RARE PLANTS IN HONG KONG

Factsheet No.10



Although the many endangered animal species, such as the Giant Panda and the Tiger, are better known, numerous plant species are also rare and in danger of extinction. The main causes are the same for plants as for the animals: habitat destruction and over-exploitation. Hong Kong would have been covered in dense forest until a few centuries ago so it is likely that many forest species are already extinct. However, Hong Kong still has a surprisingly diverse flora for its size: around 2,000 wild plant species have been recorded here. This is more than the number found in the whole of the British Isles! Out of this total, only about 600 species are common today so all the rest can be considered rare.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RARE?

There are several different ways of being rare. Some species are found at only one or two sites but are abundant where they occur. Such species may not be in immediate danger of extinction but are very vulnerable to changes in land use. Other species are widespread but nowhere abundant.



Hong Kong Camellia
(*Camellia hongkongensis*)

The most endangered species, however, are the ones, which occur, in low numbers at only one or a few sites. It is also important to distinguish between species which are rare in Hong Kong, but common and widespread elsewhere and species which are globally rare, whatever their status in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's greatest responsibility is for those species where a major proportion of the total, global population occurs in Hong Kong. Some plant species, which are rare globally, are actually quite common in Hong Kong. A good example is the Hong Kong Breadfruit (*Artocarpus hypargyrea*), which is confined to the lowland forests of South China, where it is considered in danger of extinction, but is by no means rare in Hong Kong. Several other species, including the spectacular Grantham's Camellia (*Camellia granthamania*), the Hairy Chestnut (*Castanopsis concinna*), and an attractive small tree, *Tetrathyrium subcordatum*, are very rare in both Hong Kong and the Mainland of China.

The extreme case is where a species occurs only in Hong Kong. Such species are called 'endemic' - Romer's Tree Frog is an example of an endemic animal, found



nowhere else, but plant examples are less clear. Several species, such as the Hong Kong Lady's Slipper Orchid (*Paphiopedilum purpuratum*), which used to be thought endemic to Hong Kong, have since been found elsewhere in China. Indeed, from a plant's point of view, Hong Kong is nothing special and it would be surprising if many species were found only this side of the border.



Hong Kong Lady's Slipper Orchid
(*Paphiopedilum purpuratum*)

However, a number of plants, ranging from tiny orchids to large trees, appear to be endemic to Hong Kong according to presently-available information. The status of these species may change as more becomes known about the flora of South China but, in the meantime, they are our responsibility.

PROTECTION OF RARE PLANT SPECIES IN HONG KONG

We have not provided a list of the names and localities of our rarest plants because there is a real danger that they could be driven to extinction by collecting, although this is illegal in most cases. Rare plant species are legally protected in several ways in Hong Kong. Firstly, all plants, along with all other organisms, are protected in Country Parks and Special Areas under the Country Parks Ordinance. Secondly, a list of named plant species are protected from damage or collection anywhere in Hong Kong under the Forestry Regulations of the Forests and Countryside Ordinance. This list includes all native orchids, rhododendrons, camellias and tree ferns, as well as thirty other species. In addition, a number of Hong Kong plants, including all the orchids, are covered by the Animals and Plants (Protection of Endangered Species) Ordinance which, although mainly intended to prevent trade in endangered species, also prohibits possession of organisms listed in the schedules. Finally, the presence of rare plant species may be taken into account during the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) required before any major new development, and the developer may be asked to prevent or minimise damage to them.

WHY SHOULD WE PROTECT RARE PLANTS?

Plants provide food, medicine and raw material for humans and both food and habitat for wild animals. The wild relatives of crop plants are crucial in breeding programmes for resistance to pests and diseases, which makes modern agriculture possible. Many plant species have beautiful flowers, fruits or foliage and provide pleasure both in the wild and in cultivation. Future needs for plants and their products are impossible to predict so it would be foolish to label some



species as 'useless' just because we do not currently use them. Finally, many people believe that, as the dominant species on the planet, we have a moral responsibility to protect all other species, regardless of their potential value to us.



Pitcher Plant
(*Nepenthes mirabilis*)

Further reading:

1. *China Plant Red Data Book: Rare and Endangered Plants - Volume 1* by Fu Li-kuo and others. 1992. Science Press, Beijing.
2. *Checklist of Hong Kong Plants*. 1993, Agriculture and Fisheries Department.
3. *Illustrations of Rare and Endangered Plants in Guangdong Province* by Wu Delin and Hu Changxiao. China Environmental Press, Beijing.
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