

Ziarat juniper forest declared biosphere reserve by UNESCO

ISLAMABAD: The International Coordinating Council (ICC) of the Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme has declared Juniper Forest of Ziarat in Balochistan, a Biosphere Reserve.

The decision was made during the 25th session of MAB ICC at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, making Juniper Forest of Ziarat, the second declared Biosphere Reserve (BR) in Pakistan. Earlier in 1977, MAB ICC had declared Lal Suhanra, in Cholistan desert of southern Punjab a Biosphere Reserve. The development is being considered historic in many ways.

Believed to be the second largest Juniper forest of its kind in the world, this Biosphere Reserve of Ziarat is habitat to the largest patch of Juniper forests (*Juniperus excelsa polycarpus*) in Pakistan and measures about 110,000 hectares. Juniper tree species of Ziarat have a global significance because of their old age and slow growth rate. The species finds its place in the list of the oldest living trees on earth. Though no dendrological study has yet been conducted, the age of a mature tree, according to an estimate, exceeds 4000 to 5000 years. Precisely because of this, they are locally termed as "Living Fossils".

The Juniper Forest of Ziarat provides habitat for endangered wildlife species including Suleiman Markhor, Urial, Black Bear and Wolf. The forests also serve as habitat for a number of other species such as Afghan pica, foxes, jackals and several species of migratory birds. The forest is also rich in diversity of plant species of medicinal significance. Of the 54 available species, more than 50% are of medicinal/ethno-botanic value and are being traditionally used by the local communities as panacea to treat various diseases. Moreover, the forest also provides valuable services of regulating aquifers, by protecting watersheds in the catchments that conserve and sustain provision of water resources for various production functions that support livelihoods of the local communities.

Biosphere reserves provide important areas of study to enrich the knowledge base and generate ideas to maintain a healthy relationship between mankind and nature. Biosphere reserves are not only a habitat for vegetation, but also for animals, insects and mankind as part of one nature reserve. These biosphere reserves provide challenge to researchers to be innovative, creative and adaptive of research approaches that are multidisciplinary in nature. It encompasses diverse fields including policy and management, so that human beings are better equipped with knowledge and ideas that ought to be ecology friendly and sensitive to nature.

Pakistan National MAB Committee submitted the Dossier and Management Plan of Ziarat Juniper Forest to MAB Secretariat for its inclusion in the list of World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR). Each year since 1970, International Co-ordinating Council (ICC) of the Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme has been deciding new biosphere reserves to be included in the list of WNBR. The MAB ICC comprises of scientists to evaluate each proposal seeking enlistment in the WNBR, on the basis of ecological importance with respect to flora, fauna and local communities. The MAB Programme promotes interdisciplinary research agenda and capacity building with an aim to highlight ecological, social and economic costs of biodiversity loss, and proposes ways to reduce it. The WNBR currently counts 610 biosphere reserves in 117 countries worldwide.

Pakistan National MAB Committee constitutes of scientists, managers of federal and provincial forests, wildlife departments and NGOs that are related to the field of ecology, natural resource management and conservation. National MAB Committee in their regular meetings decides the sites to be proposed for WNBR enlistment.

Next in the pipeline, Pakistan National MAB Committee has plan to conduct the review of the Lal Suhanra Biosphere Reserves, and propose another site to be enlisted in the WNBR along with the hosting of the South and Central Asia MAB (SACAM) Network meeting in Pakistan in October 2013. These initiatives are expected to promote the MAB Programme and expand scientific research activities on the Biosphere Reserves in Pakistan.