

## **Juniper forest declared biosphere reserve**

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 ICC at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, making Juniper Forest of Ziarat the second declared biosphere reserve in Pakistan.

Earlier in 1977, ICC had declared Lal Suhanra, in Cholistan desert of southern Punjab, a biosphere reserve. The development is being considered historic in many ways.

Juniper forest is habitat to the largest patch of junipers (*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 5000 years. Precisely because of this, they are locally termed '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 per cent are of medicinal/ethno-botanic value and are being traditionally used by the local communities as panacea to treat various diseases.

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.