

Critical record of Afghanistan's natural heritage blooms again

April 17 2010

The Wildlife Conservation Society announced the restoration of Kabul University's herbarium—a once-threatened collection of nearly 25,000 preserved plant specimens—in a multi-partner effort that will vastly improve Afghan research capacity and inform decision-making regarding the future management and protection of Afghanistan's environment.

The herbarium restoration was organized by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) PEACE project—a consortium led by UC Davis and Texas A&M University—together with several partners including WCS. Other partners included ECODIT-Biodiversity Support Program for the National Environmental Protection Agency and the Purdue University-A4 Project, all funded by USAID.

The herbarium survived destructive and repressive rule under the Taliban regime thanks to the efforts of Dr. Noor Ahmad Mirazai, a professor of botany at Kabul University. During Taliban rule, all government property was threatened with being destroyed in an effort to expunge "foreign influence." Dr. Mirazai meticulously moved the herbarium—predominantly collected and donated by scientists from Germany and Scotland in the 1960s and 1970s—from room to room at the University and eventually to his home to safeguard it. He returned the collection to Kabul University when the Taliban's reign ended.

"WCS is proud to be a part of such great news coming out of a region that has suffered through much adversity and loss," said Colin Poole,

Director of WCS's Asia program. "The actions taken by heroic individuals in the name of science and education are a tremendous inspiration to all associated with the project. We continue to see that through dedication and support for conservation work, Afghanistan's natural heritage can be preserved for future generations even in the most difficult of times."

The restored herbarium will be of immense benefit to researchers and other scientists, students, and teachers and provides extensive baseline data for Afghanistan's flora. Environmental impact assessments that could not previously be undertaken due to lack of information are now possible. Data to help inform the design of natural resources management and rehabilitation measures are now available, and identification and preservation of protected areas will be improved.

Due to Afghanistan's position at the intersection of three different biological realms (Palearctic, Indomalayan and Afrotropical) and combination of high mountains, plains and deserts, the country contains a surprisingly diverse assemblage of plants and animals. This includes nine species of wild cats and numerous varieties of crops of importance to humans, from wheat to pistachio, almond, apricot and walnut trees.

WCS has been working since 2006 to help [Afghanistan](#) conserve its wildlife and natural resources. As part of this process, WCS is working with local communities and the Afghan government to establish a network of parks and protected areas. Last year, Afghanistan announced the creation of its first national park: Band-e-Amir, a spectacular series of six deep blue lakes separated by natural dams made of travertine, a mineral deposit.

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

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