

New species of Camphor tree identified in Western Ghats, India

The genus *Cinnamomum* belonging to the family Lauraceae encompasses about 200-350 species occurring mostly in the Old World tropics, particularly in South East Asia. India accounts for about 40 species of the genus distributed in Western Ghats, Eastern Himalayas and Andaman Islands. Among the total 18 species recorded from south India, 16 are endemic to Western Ghats region. Now, a new species of the genus has been identified from Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram districts of Kerala. It is reported for the first time from Agasthyamalai Hills situated in southern parts of Western Ghats and therefore named as *Cinnamomum agasthyamalanum* Robi, Sujanapal & Udayan. The new species occurs in the elevation range of 600-1300 meters and is highly endemic to certain parts of the region. Three researchers namely Mr. Robi, Mr. Sujanapal and Mr. Udayan identified this new tree species and published their finding in International Journal of Advanced Research.

The tree is famous for the characteristic 'camphor' formed in the oil cells of different plant parts. It is a major source of natural camphor used commonly in indigenous medicine and in a variety of confectionaries. It is also applied externally to treat muscular strains and inflammations. At present there are only two known species with camphor smell namely *Cinnamomum camphora* and *C. capparucoronde*. While the former is widely cultivated in China, Taiwan, southern parts of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, the latter is restricted to the forests of Sri Lanka. Camphor oil is extracted by steam from the chipped wood, root stumps and branches of the camphor tree. It is then rectified under vacuum and filter-pressed.

The new tree species of camphor can reach a maximum height of 8 m. 'It is found distributed in the windward evergreen forests of Agasthyamalai phyto-geographical region of southern Western Ghats. The population is very low in all regions which were surveyed. The leaves and stems of the new species have the smell of camphor probably due to the high content of volatile oil' said Mr. Sujanapal of the Kerala Forest Research Institute, Thrissur, Kerala. The exact distribution range of *C. agasthyamalanum* populations is between Attayar and Chemungi areas of Agasthyamala Hills. Also some scattered populations are found to occur at Rosemala in Kollam district of Kerala. In all the locations, the species occur in scattered populations stressing need for its conservation priorities.



Leaves and bark of *C. agasthyamalanum*

(Image courtesy journalijar.com)

On the way of identification, morphology of *C. agasthyamalanum* resembles close to another species known as *C. dubium* by habit and leaves. However, further examinations clearly differentiated the two species. *C. agasthyamalanum* exhibits typical camphor smell in its inner bark and leaves. Also the position of leaves on branches and flowers on inflorescences indicated its uniqueness. The tree species identified is the only native species with strong smell of camphor, probably due to the high content of volatile oil. This makes the discovery very important

economically. The challenge now is to find out whether it would be possible to extract camphor at a commercially viable level.

Source:

<http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/1460894-new-species-of-camphor-tree-discovered-in-india/>