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India's only pitcher plant tricks its prey into falling into it.

During a recent trip to the Garo Hills in Meghalaya, I was standing next to a stream along with a group of friends, searching for butterflies.

“Watch out on your left side. Don't fall over; you might get eaten up!” I said, in jest. My friend had just stumbled against a carnivorous plant. India's only pitcher plant – *Nepenthes khasiana* – grows in the north-eastern state of Meghalaya. This plant, believe it or not, devours insects!

This plant has a cylindrical-shaped “pitcher” that grows at the end of its leaf. The pitcher, about six inches long, has a sticky liquid inside it. If an insect falls into the pitcher, it drowns in the liquid. At the bottom of the pitcher are glands, which are used to absorb nutrients from captured insects.



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escaping!

Peering into one of the pitchers, I found numerous dead insects floating in the fluid at the base of the pitcher. A few were still alive; and they were struggling to survive.

The Garo tribe, which lives in this area, call the pitcher plant *memang-koksi* meaning “basket of the devil”! For, once in the “basket”, you cannot escape! The Garo tribe uses the pitcher plant for medicinal purposes. The juices inside the plant are used as ear and eye drops, while the roots are powdered and used to treat skin diseases.

Unfortunately, this plant grows only in a few areas in the Garo, Jaintia and Khasi Hills in Meghalaya, the only places in the world that this threatened species grows in the wild.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature prepares the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, which assesses the threats to the world’s plants and animals. The pitcher plant in Meghalaya is listed as “Endangered”, mainly on account of over-exploitation, habitat degradation – human habitation, roads, and coal mining.

I have been seeing the lovely pitcher plant in the Garo Hills for the last five years. And on each of my annual visits, I wonder, will we let this lovely plant live? Or will this be my last sighting of the plant in the wild. Only time will tell...

This series on Conservation and Nature is brought to you by Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group. (www.kalpavriksh.org)

