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Puerto Rican flora in ways of extinction [1]

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By Liz Yanira Del Valle/Special for El Nuevo Dia endi.com [2] The Araña, the Chupacallos and the Matabuey have nothing to do with the animal kingdom or with certain characters of the Caribbean mythology. They are the common names for three of the 49 endangered species of plants and trees in Puerto Rico. The distribution of the 49 species is the following: 33 trees and shrubs, eight ferns, two cacti, two herbaceous orchids and four plants. According to the Federal Law of Endangered Species, the amount of endangered plants surpasses the amount of endangered animals, which is 29. For botanist Eugenio Santiago, the fact that more people know about endangered animals than plants is a matter of perception. “In wild life it is logical that the animal kingdom is more attractive than plants. But it is necessary to overcome that prejudiced vision of seeing nature. These subjective views do not help us conserving our biodiversity. It is time that we understand that its critical to study and conserve all the living organisms that surround us, it does matter to what group they belong, nor its size or composition”, thought Santiago, that directs, in collaboration with the Department of Natural Resources, the Federal Wild Life and Fishing Service of and the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico, a propagation program for endangered plants and trees in Puerto Rico. Santiago indicated that these listings are created by the botanical scientific community that evaluates the species and provides the lists to the pertinent agencies and organizations. “There are species whose populations are smaller by nature, that live very in specialized places or have very particular conditions to survive. These are infrequent or rare species whose vulnerability to human impact is greater”, the scientist said. Santiago mentioned deforestation as the main factor for the disappearance of many species of the vegetal kingdom. “The case of Puerto Rico is not an isolated one. In the last 500 years, with the western expansion and the conquest of America, the impact of human activity on plants has been terrible because the disappearance of the species was increased in an exaggerated form”, explained. According to the specialist, in this context, the deforestation of Puerto Rico was so that it lost 95% of his original forests. “The degree of land use was so intensive and unfriendly from

the ecological point of view that this was the result. The techniques used in our agricultural economy caused a deforestation of great proportions in our territory", also added the university professor. The habitat of almost the 3,000 native Puerto Rican plant species of original plants of Puerto Rico has been strongly threatened by a much accelerated deforestation. Santiago added other factors. The propagation of certain species is more difficult that in others. There are species that need to have both sexes (feminine and masculine) to propagate. Logically, if a sex disappears there will be survival issues for that species. In the case of the parasitic plants (they need direct contact with other plants) if one disappears the other has the same fate. Also there are species that depend on the pollination and transport of their seeds by animals. If those animals disappear, the same will happen to the plant. In the breeding grounds of the Herbarium some of these peculiar species can be appreciated and they are already favorably propagating to return them to certain protected zones of the country. Santiago showed the Araña, (Schoepfia arenaria), an endemic shrub from limestone and coastal zones of the north of the Island. It is semi-parasitic, because it develops connection with other plants through its roots. This allows it to receive food from other trees of the forest. It produces a red fruit as large as a a medium olive. In route to the Herbarium, the botanist showed us the Chupacallos, (Pleodendron macranthum), which belongs to an old lineage in the history of the flowering plants. Its flowers have thick petals of a green-yellowish color. It is one of the rarest trees. They live in El Yunque and the Carso (limestone) area. They have very aromatic leaves. The Matabuey, (Goetzea elegans), Santiago indicated that it is endemic of Puerto Rico. Although it belongs to the family of the tomato, is a tree that reaches 40 to 50 feet. It belongs to a unique group of the Caribbean and their nearer relatives are in South America and Madagascar. There are only three known individuals of this species. Now thanks to this program there are already new populations in the north of the Island and Vieques. In the Herbarium, the Walnut or the Walnut tree of the Antilles (Juglans jamaicensi), which belongs to the same family of the tree that produces commercial walnuts, is also abundant. This group of trees grows in the colder zones of the North hemisphere of the world, has a species in the Caribbean. In Puerto Rico it grows in high elevation forests. Its nut is smaller than the one than we buy in the supermarket. A population of these trees has already been established in the Central Mountain range. Naturally and originally it grows in Adjuntas. Another tree that is part of this effort is the Nigua tree, (Obovata cornutia), endemic of Puerto Rico, grows in wooded hills and mountains, and has very pretty blue-purple with yellow flowers. The Peperomia, (Peperomia wheeleri), is in the listing, and its also bred in the herbarium. For a long time it was considered endemic of Culebra, specifically of Monte Resaca, but some wild populations have been found in the Main Island. It belongs to a group of species that are used with ornamental intentions. Other species included in the endangered plants list are: the tree of Ramon, Diablito de Tres Cuernos, Capá Rosa, Palma de Manaca, Higüero de sierra, Palo de Rosa, Erubia, Cóbana Negra, Palo de Jazmín, Palo Colorado, Bariaco, Helecho de bosque enano, Higo Chumbo y Pelos del Diablo. The rest of the members of this list are know exclusively by their scientific names: Thelypteris inabonensis, Mitracarpus maxwelliae, Myrcia paganii, and Catesbaea melanocarpa, among others. The project developed in the Herbarium also investigates and documents the scientific information on all the endangered species in the Island.

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