

Report on the field trip to Mawphlang Sacred Grove on the 20th October, 2022.

On the 20th of October, 2022, 86 students of the 3rd and 5th Semesters along with 5 teachers from the Botany Department of Shillong College embarked on a 1 hour journey to the Mawphlang sacred grove locally known as *Law Kyntang* or *Law Lyngdoh* in Mawphlang Village, located 26 kilometres away from Shillong and spanning an area of 76.8 hectares. The students arrived enthusiastically at 8:30 am at the All India Radio Station, Bomfyle Road where two buses had already been waiting ready to leave at 9:00am sharp.

The aim of the trip was to observe and learn about the many plant species that are present in the forest, to learn more about the culture and to be able to understand the value of conserving nature in its totality.

Upon arrival on the site, fields and meadows greeted us and the forest could be seen just tucked away almost hidden, looking almost impenetrable. The village is also known for its rich heritage site, providing an outlook on the lifestyle of the Khasi people. The people of Meghalaya believe in preserving local forests which they consider sacred and the Law Kyntang in Mawphlang is just one of many such forests present in Meghalaya. The sacred grove is a place where religious and cultural practices have been carried out for hundreds of years till today.

One of the guides, Bah Teibok Iangblah, gave a brief introduction about the history and significance of the forest. The forest is divided into three parts, the first and oldest part of the forest present on the left, where larger and older trees that are more than 800 years old is called the *Khlaw Lait Tyrkhang*, looked after by the Blah Clan. The middle portion, covering about 40 hectares of the forest area is called the *Khlaw Phiephandi*, looked after by the Lyngdoh Clan and is considered the most Sacred by the people of the Mawphlang Village. The youngest part of the forest present on the right is called the *Khlaw Nongkynrih* and is looked after by the Hima Mawphlang. Monoliths can be seen standing near the entrance of the forest to commemorate the memory of “Ka Mei Kmah”. The forest in its natural state has been preserved by the people of the Hima and protected by the “La Basa”, the goddess that dwells among the forest. Therefore nothing can be taken out of the forest.

Students were then divided into groups accompanied by guides who gave a tour of the forest.

The Sacred Grove is rich in its biodiversity and is a sanctuary providing a safe haven to the endemic and rare species. It is home to around 450 species of plants and at least 25 species of orchids. It provides a living proof of an “Old Earth” that encompasses life untouched by human civilization. This is seen in the 600 year old *Myrica esculenta* (Soh Phie) tree present within the forest. It helps in the preservation of rare plants like *Taxus baccata*, *Botrychium lanuginosum*, *Helicia nilagirica* and many more. Many medicinal plants are also found inside the sacred grove like *Arisaema* sp., *Rhododendron* sp., *Elaeocarpus robustus*, *Myrica esculenta*, etc.

The oak tree, *Quercus griffithii* (Dieng Wah) can be seen in the forest as well as the *Michelia champaca*. The khasi pine, *Pinus kesiya* can be found throughout the forest. Ferns such as *Dyopteris* sp., *Polypodium* sp., *Lycopodium* sp., *Lindseaea odorata* fill the forest floor. Orchids like *Cymbidium elegans* (Tiew Tyrshup) are found hanging elegantly from trees, *Epipogium roseum* is a saprophytic orchid found in the forest. Jewel orchids such as *Ludisia* sp., *Zeuxine* sp., can be found on the shady moist forest floor. *Raphidophora* sp.

climbs the height of the tree. Macro fungi like *Xylaria* sp. (Dead man's finger), *Fistulina* sp., *Microporous* sp.; parasitic plants like *Balanophora* sp., are also found in the forest.

The sacred grove holds within itself the lifelong traditions of the Khasi culture and provides us with a deeper understanding of the close relationship shared between the Khasi people and mother nature. Sacred Groves are greatly efficient in conserving and preserving biodiversity. It provides an endless amount of knowledge for generations to come.



A group photo



Students given instructions by the local guides before entering into the sacred grove.



Students entering the sacred grove.



Fig. Some plant species observed inside the sacred grove.