

## ***Rhododendron caucasicum* in Armenia: Research and Conservation**

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Caucasian rhododendron (*Rhododendron caucasicum* Pall.) is the only rhododendron species found in Armenia and one of the most beautiful representatives of the country's flora. This is up to 50cm tall evergreen relict shrub with large white or creamy, rarely pinkish flowers. The general distribution area of the species lies in the subalpine belt of the Greater and Lesser Caucasus ranges within one of the world's biodiversity hotspots - the Caucasus Ecoregion. *R.caucasicum* is an endangered species of Armenian flora and its populations here form the south-eastern boundary of the species distribution range. In 2011-13 in the framework of the Important Plant Areas (IPA) of Armenia project, supported by The Rufford Foundation, the rhododendron heaths were included in the list of rare and threatened habitat types of Armenia. Accordingly, one of the sites, where Caucasian rhododendron is found was identified as an IPA.

The project "*Rhododendron caucasicum* survey in Armenia for conservation of the species and its habitats" (2019-2020) became the first focused study of the species in Armenia. The project was supported by the Research Foundation of the American Rhododendron Society and implemented due to a generous donation from the "Norris-Rugel Charitable Foundation". The species populations assessment in Armenia was carried out and its distribution map was prepared, the rhododendron habitats were studied and the threats have been identified. New findings and rediscoveries have been made. The importance of the detailed studies on the *R. caucasicum*'s area in Armenia and clarification of its populations' state is outlined as a necessary step towards monitoring and conservation of this species. The species' variability in the populations, its biology, climate change adaptation mechanisms and other aspects are of particular interest. Also, there is a need in ex-situ conservation of the Caucasian rhododendron through its introduction to the Botanical gardens of Armenia.