

Guardians of the Valley: The Sacred Junipers of Ladakh

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Ladakh, renowned for its majestic mountains and mystical rivers, is also home to diverse flora and fauna. This unique natural wealth not only draws tourists, but also wildlife enthusiasts and researchers from various fields, eager to explore and protect its hidden ecological treasures. Ladakh's vibrant cultural heritage shines through its unique architecture, ancient monasteries, colorful festivals, and interesting oral literature. Together, these elements weave the distinct identity of Ladakh, reflecting both its natural environment and a deep-rooted cultural legacy.



Juniper leaves smoldering in a censer, placed at the entrance of a famous temple in Fokar.

Despite its largely treeless landscape, Ladakh has scattered Juniper woodlands (*Juniperus semiglobosa* Regel), commonly known as 'Himalayan Pencil Cedar' and locally known as Shukpa. These woodlands are especially found in the northwestern regions of Ladakh, particularly in and around Kargil. One such grove is found in the Fokar village, a small hamlet nestled in the Shargole block, approximately 40 km from Kargil town. An interesting tale revolves around this Juniper grove, inspiring generations of locals to protect it, and passing down this reverence and guardianship through the ages. The legend has it that this grove is the sacred abode of an important oracle of Fokar village. In Tibetan Buddhism, oracles are spirit mediums who enter the body of another medium, either a man or a woman, through a ritual. They are believed to protect the Buddha Dharma and its followers, as well as to provide healing and foretell the future. It is believed that several centuries ago, around the 8th and 11th century AD, an oracle named Fokar Chomo arrived in the Fokar village alongside 'Guru Rinpoche' (the Precious Guru) or 'the Second Buddha', who is widely celebrated for introducing Buddhism to the Tibetan lands. Each juniper tree in the grove is regarded as an integral part of the oracle's presence, with every tree bearing its own unique name. These trees are not merely flora but revered as living members of the oracle's spiritual essence, embodying a sacred connection with the inhabitants of the village and serving as their protectors. Each year, the villagers gather in the grove to offer prayers at a temple dedicated to the oracle. In respect for the sacred nature of the grove, no one is permitted to cut, damage, or even pluck leaves from the juniper trees.

Beyond Fokar, other sacred Juniper groves exist, including a well-known one in Hemis Shukpachan, a village about 80 km from Leh. The name 'Shukpachan' itself comes from the Ladakhi word for Juniper, 'Shukpa'. The trees in this grove appear to be older than those in Fokar, though their exact ages remain unknown. With support from the LAHDC (Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council) and the Leh Forest Department, the residents of Hemis Shukpachan have safeguarded this last remaining population of Juniper trees.

Leaves and twigs from Juniper trees growing in areas without any sacred associations, are commonly used as incense in monasteries and homes throughout the region. These traditional practices not only highlight the deep reverence the local communities hold for the sanctity of the Juniper trees, but also play a crucial role in preserving the area's biodiversity. Conversations with locals suggest that Juniper populations in Ladakh have declined over the years. A common view is that much of the damage occurred during the infamous Kargil War of 1999. This decline may be attributed not only to the direct destruction of vegetation but also to the degradation of habitats and soil quality caused by the bombings, heavy artillery fire, and the movement of military vehicles, which can lead to soil compaction, reducing its ability to absorb water and support plant life.

The regeneration of Juniper trees has only started to show signs of revival in the past few years, suggesting a slow recovery process after the environmental

impacts of the war. Another significant threat to Juniper populations is overharvesting. The high demand for Juniper twigs during the festive season of Losar has led to unsustainable harvesting practices, further exacerbating the decline of these trees in the region.

Given the ecological, economic, and cultural importance of *Juniperus semiglobosa*, the species was declared the state tree of the Union Territory of Ladakh in 2023. This designation is expected to raise awareness and increase the tree's popularity among locals, while primarily strengthening conservation initiatives focused on preserving and expanding Juniper populations for future generations. Nevertheless, the cultural significance of the species is key to the success of these long-term conservation initiatives.



The sacred Juniper trees stand resiliently through thick (ice) and thin (air), in isolation and in congregation, as if they whisper the vagaries of time.

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A close-up view of the sacred Juniper grove and the Oracle's temple adorned with prayer flags tied around it.



A panoramic view of the sacred Juniper grove above Fokar village.