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Latest research shows that native plant species in Utah are increasingly in peril

20% increase in highest priority categories from 2012 to 2016
Almost 1/3rd of our native flora is rare and of conservation concern
Over 18% are at elevated levels of concern with 6% at highest levels

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH: A journal article published today in *Calochortiana*, a research journal of the Utah Native Plant Society (UNPS), indicates that more Utah native plant species are at risk than previously thought, and that threats are continuing to rise. This latest article, an update from a prior study published in 2012, and produced by the UNPS Rare Plant Committee, represents the single most comprehensive study of Utah native plant vascular¹ species ever compiled. The 248 page issue can be downloaded from:

<http://www.unps.org/Calochortiana.html>

Since its founding in 1978, UNPS has provided public forums including annual rare plant meetings, conducted research and related activities that have been used to determine priorities for conservation action for imperiled native plant species of Utah. It has also long been an advocate for the protection of many sensitive plant species occurring in the Intermountain West including those designated formally as threatened or endangered. The current state of our knowledge is the result of the longstanding efforts of many individuals and numerous prior publications and botanical collections.

A more recently implemented ranking method based on factors that can largely be objectively evaluated and quantified was developed by Walter Fertig and described with the first list using that newer ranking method in 2009, and later updated in 2012. Points are assigned based on seven factors including geographic range, number of populations, abundance, habitat specificity, intrinsic rarity, magnitude and imminence of threats and population trends. Input is sought from anyone that has knowledge about any entity that is being evaluated, i.e. the process is completely transparent and welcomes any and all public input as well as from knowledgeable individuals that study Utah plants. Plants with low scores (species that are common, for example) as well as plants that are questionable with respect to an occurrence in Utah or with questionable taxonomy are excluded. Taxa² are then categorized based on their point scores into conservation priority status groups: extremely high, high, watch, medium, need data and status uncertain.

The article published today is not only a cumulative update to the 2012 list but has also greatly expanded its scope based on newer publications including taxonomic revisions, and newer field work. There is also a special section that focuses on montane and alpine plants with specific lists for the La Sal, Uinta, Tushar, and Deep Creek mountain ranges.

Of the 858 taxa that were ranked in 2012, some 1,214 are contained in the latest treatment.

Some 38 of these are ranked at **Extremely high** (“exH”) levels (many of those, but not all, are taxa with a federal status under the Endangered Species Act; the UNPS list is purely informational and does not carry any legal authority), and 142 are in the **High** category which comprise the **180 “most at risk”** taxa in the state and where conservation attention should be focused. This is a **20%** increase from the 150 taxa similarly ranked in 2012. See breakdown below.

By year: Utah's most “at risk” vascular plant species using the “Fertig” method as ranked by the UNPS rare plant committee:

Year	exH	High	Total
2009	31	114	145
2012	31	119	150
2014 (draft)	37	135	172
2016	38	142	180

As explained in the article, these expanded numbers are the result an increase in both our knowledge³ as well as development threats from numerous sources. Increased threats in counties with alpine areas as well as continued heavy development along the Wasatch Front account for a large part of that increase. The highest number of priority species overall, however, are in southern Utah due to high numbers of endemic⁴ species as well as species that are on the periphery of their ranges.

In comparing the evaluated taxa to the total vascular plant taxa that are currently known to occur in Utah (which currently is 3,200):

Category	<u>% of Utah's vascular flora</u>
exH and High:	5.6%
Above plus Watch:	18.7%
Above plus Medium priority:	32.2%

Evaluating Utah's rare plant species is a never-ending work-in-process. As additional discoveries and additional scientific studies are made, changes will in turn be made to these rankings.

While the extinction of a globally rare vascular plant species or lower taxonomic entity occurring in Utah has not yet been clearly documented, several taxa are suspected to have been lost before ever having had a chance to be studied, and we have already lost native species that used to occur in Utah but do still occur elsewhere.

The Utah Native Plant Society is a Utah non-profit organization and a qualified 501(c)(3) organization. Its officers/directors and committee members are staffed by volunteers, none of whom receive any compensation. The UNPS Rare Plant Committee is comprised of rare plant experts from academia,

government, and the private sector and the results were reviewed by the committee.

Endnotes:

¹ Vascular plants do not include lichens, mosses, mushrooms and critical life forms of life about which even less is known in terms of rarity than vascular plants.

² Taxa includes species and their subspecies/varieties as described and recognized by scientists

³ In the 2009 analysis, some 93 plants that were then in an uncertain status and not included as a part of the total have since been evaluated.

⁴ Geographically restricted. Some 475 endemic species occur in Utah.