DESCRIPTION

One of our rarest mountain plants, this plant has suffered from over collection in the past and over grazing of its habitat since. A tall perennial and very palatable plant that only grows on ledges inaccessible to grazing animals. Limited to relict, small populations their isolation has limited their capacity to cross pollinate and as a result genetic inbreeding is leading to very low levels of seed production. The plant does reproduce vegetatively, but grazing limits the populations to small ledges. Plants cannot spread to new sites unless grazing levels, from deer, sheep and hares are lowered.

This is one of our rarest mountain plants and only four sites remain. Outside of Scotland, this plant occurs in all the main mountain areas of Europe from the Pyrenees to the Alps, the Appennines and the Balkans and throughout Scandinavian mountains.

On Lochnagar, a climbing route ‘The potato patch’ is named after the alpine sow thistle colony there. Fed to cattle and eaten by nursing mothers, popular belief is that the plant increases milk production. It also contains insect-deterrent chemicals, which make it taste bitter. This may account of one of its Scandinavian names alpine salad.

Listed on the Scottish Biodiversity List.

DISTRIBUTION MAP

THREATS

The small colonies remaining are at risk from stochastic events such as rock fall.

Lack of viable seed means that populations can only spread vegetatively, yet this is limited by over grazing.

ACTION REQUIRED

1. Support conservation at its 5 remaining sites through sustainable deer numbers
2. Consider the value of a statutory underpinning of sustainable deer management agreements.

FURTHER READING

http://www.plantlife.org.uk/scotland/wild_plants/plant_species_scotland/?ent=171