

Global cactus crop

By naming Cactus, we all imagine a hard looking plant group with its not so glamorous members who are mostly struggling for life in arid region. But there are some who really raise our imagination beyond limit. *Opuntia ficus-indica*, commonly known as “prickly pear cactus” has interesting connection to the foundation of Mexico city (former Tenochtitlan), Cuban migration issues and agriculture.

According to Aztec myth, they were commanded by the Sun god Huitzilopochtli to colonize on the land where they “would find an eagle sitting on a cactus growing out of a stone submerged in a lake”. The place was found near Lake Texcoco, where they founded their capital Tenochtitlan, present day Mexico City. The Current coat of arms of Mexico (i.e. national shield of Mexico) depicts the heavenly instruction in the form of a Mexican golden eagle sitting on a prickly pear cactus emerging from a stone submerged in a waterbody.



Mexican coat of arms

In Cuba, the same cactus had been used to form a 28 km long natural barrier surrounding the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base to prevent Cubans from escaping their country to take refuge in the United States. It was popularly called as “Cactus Curtain”.

This cactus is famous for its food value and as a host plant for Carmine dye producing insect (*Dactylopius coccus*). At present, it is the most agronomically important cactus crop globally because of its resilience to prolonged drought, high temperatures, and poor soil.

Photo: Wikipedia

Collector: Debarati Chakraborty