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Botanic Gardens Conservation International

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The Fifth International Botanic Gardens Conservation Congress took place in Cape Town, South Africa. It was held in the beautiful surroundings of the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden on the northern slopes of Table Mountain. It was coorganized by BGCI and the National Botanical Institute of South Africa (NBI) and hosted by NBI.

The theme of the congress was Plants, People and Planet Earth - the role of botanical gardens in sustainable living. The aim of the congress was to review the priorities for botanic gardens as centres for biodiversity conservation and the promotion of environmental sustainability. The congress supported the development of a renewed global strategy for botanic gardens in the 21st century and highlight shared responsibilities and their common mission.

The Congress was a very great success and was attended by over 400 participants from 55 countries. For all those involved in the congress, the meeting and their visit to South Africa was a memorable, worthwhile and extremely enjoyable experience. Many advances were achieved through the meeting, particularly in defining future botanic garden roles in conservation and education, enhancing linkages between botanic garden staff and institutions worldwide and in helping to set priorities for future actions by the international botanic gardens community.

The organizers were also grateful to have the participation of the following organizations:

- American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta
- Asociación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Jardines Botánicos
- International Association of Botanic Gardens
- IUCN - The World Conservation Union
- World Wide Fund for Nature, WWF-International
- Asociación Argentinos de Jardines Botánicos
- Asociación Ibero-Macaronesian de Jardines Botánicos
- Asociación Mexicana de Jardines Botánicos
- Association des Jardins Botaniques et Arboreta de Belgique
- Australian Network for Plant Conservation
- Baltic Botanic Garden Association
- BGCI/IABG European Botanic Gardens Consortium

- Botanic Garden Education Network, U.K.
- Canadian Botanical Conservation Network
- Center for Plant Conservation (U.S.A.)
- Council of Botanical Gardens of Russia
- Council of Botanical Gardens of Ukraine
- Indonesian Network for Plant Conservation
- International Plant Genetic Resources Institute
- Jardins Botaniques de France et des Pays Francophones
- PlantNet - the Plant Collections Network of Britain & Ireland
- Rede Brasileira de Jardins Botânicos
- Red Nacional de Jardines Botánicos de Colombia
- Red Nacional de Jardines Botánicos de Cuba
- Società Botanica Italiana - Gruppo Orti Botanici
- Southern African Botanical Diversity Network
- Verband Botanischer Gärten e.V.

The organizers would like to acknowledge the support of Botanic Gardens Conservation International, The British Council, British Airways, the National Botanical Institute, South Africa and Old Mutual, to whom we are very grateful.

The local organizing committee was chaired by Prof. Brian J. Huntley (Chief Executive of NBI) who ensured that all arrangements were made with the greatest possible efficiency. The congress participants were extremely well looked after from the moment they registered for the Congress to the time they returned home through the attention to detail of the local team, which included Fiona McKay and Diane Stafford, ably assisted by Ingrid Nanni, George Davis, David Davidson, Cheryl Gibson, Mike O'Callaghan, Ben Engelbrecht and many other staff of NBI.

The development of the scientific programme for the Congress was led by Peter Wyse Jackson, Brian Huntley, George Davis, Fiona Dennis, Julia Willison and Ally Ashwell, with the support of an international programme committee that provided much useful advice and suggestions. Abstracts of presentations given were compiled by George Davis and Fiona Dennis and published as a booklet available to all delegates.

During the Congress a meeting of the Trustees of BGCI was held attended by Sir John Quinton, (Chairman), Dr David Bramwell, Mr Anthony Forbes, Prof Ole Hamann, Sir Ghilleain T. Prance, M. Philippe Richard, Dr Roy Taylor and Ms Judith Zuk.

BGCI staff was represented at the Congress by Peter Wyse Jackson, Diane Wyse Jackson, Fiona Dennis, Etelka Leadlay, Julia Willison, Lucy Sutherland and Donald Gordon and supported by Barbara Bridge and Vivien Isaac at BGCI's London offices. BGCI staff from regional divisions or projects were Dr Bert van den Wollenberg (BGCI Dutch Regional Office), Dr Igor Smirnov (Chairman of BGCI Moscow Division) and Isabelle Bagdassarin (BGCI/FFI North Africa Project Coordinator).

During the Congress delegates were able to participate in important events marking the opening of new buildings and facilities at the Kirstenbosch Garden, including the Kirstenbosch Visitors' Centre, opened by Dr Pallo Jordon, Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism and the Kirstenbosch Research Centre, opened by Dr Peter Raven, Director of the Missouri Botanical Garden, St Louis, U.S.A. As part of the opening of the Kirstenbosch Research Centre there were displays and demonstrations of current research at the Garden on conservation biology, applied horticulture, impacts of global climate change, and the evolution and systematics of the Cape flora. The Open House was followed by dinner and guest lecture given by Dr Peter Raven, entitled Botanic Gardens: Challenges for the new Millennium.

At the end of the congress a Farewell Banquet was held in the vast marquee erected for the congress. At the banquet speeches of thanks were given by Prof. Brian Huntley and Dr Peter Wyse Jackson and presentations were made by BGCI to Brian Huntley, Diane Stafford, Fiona McKay and George Davis for their outstanding contribution.

Pre and Post congress tours were made to the Garden Route and the Western Cape. Mid-congress tours varied from the Cape Peninsula National Park, the West Coast National Park and the Karoo and Harold Porter National Botanical Gardens which allowed the delegates to see plants in their native habitats and a Cape wineland tour and urban conservation in the Cape.

The success of the Congress can be summed up by David Bramwell (Director, Jardín Canario "Viera y Clavijo", Gran Canaria, Spain and BGCI Trustee) in the recent issue of PLANT TALK (Issue 15, October 1998):

"I left Cape Town with a strong sense that, thanks to the efforts of BGCI and its members, botanic gardens have at last taken up the mantle of conservation. The long-sought and seamless union of on site and off site conservation, forged by the horticultural skills, conservation science facilities and education programmes offered by botanic gardens has become a reality. Botanic Gardens have exciting days ahead in the next Millennium".

The Programme

The opening ceremony was performed by Dr Pallo Jordan, Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism and was addressed by Prof. Colin Johnson, Chairman of the Board of the National Botanical Institute and Sir John Quinton, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Botanic Gardens Conservation International.

An introductory address was given by Dr Peter Wyse Jackson (Secretary General of BGCI) who outlined the recent advances and major activities of botanic gardens worldwide in recent years, since the Congress last met in Western Australia in 1995. He also launched and introduced participants to a new process to prepare a revision of The Botanic Gardens Conservation Strategy (1989). Dr Wyse Jackson proposed that this new Strategy will be an action-orientated document, entitled An International Agenda for Botanic Gardens in Conservation. He invited botanic gardens and their network organizations to contribute to the preparation of the new plan and to increase their work for and to achieve global plant conservation.

This was followed by a keynote plenary addressed by Dr Kingsley Dixon of Kings Park and Botanic Gardens, Perth, Australia. Kingsley Dixon spoke on the subject of the frontiers of plant science and their relevance to botanic gardens. The other keynote plenary speakers were Dr Cristián Samper (Instituto Alexander von Humboldt, Colombia), Ms Ellen Kirby (Brooklyn Botanic Garden, U.S.A), Ms Stella Simiyu (National Museums of Kenya), Dr Angela Leiva (Jardín Botánico Nacional, Cuba) and Dr Roy Taylor (Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, U.S.A.). On the final day of the Congress additional keynote papers were delivered by Prof. Sir Ghilleen T. Prance (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, U.K.), Prof. Brian Huntley (NBI) and Xola Mkefe (Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, South Africa).

During the five days of the Congress plenary sessions were held on the first and last days, with two days of simultaneous workshops as well as a full day of local field trips. The workshops were held on a diverse range of subjects covering seven themes - Conservation Practice, Policies and Conventions, Garden Management and Horticulture, Science and Research, Education, Capacity Building and Medicinal Plants. Thus there was a choice of five workshops running concurrently on each of the two days. An additional session for network meetings was held. There was also an extensive programme of poster papers coordinated by George Davis.

During the workshops, participants were asked to develop conclusions and recommendations as a contribution towards the new International Agenda for Botanic Gardens in Conservation. This is due to be completed and launched at the Sixth International Botanic Gardens Conservation Congress in Asheville in the year 2000. The conclusions and recommendations have been compiled under the 31 topics for the seven themes and are included in this report. These conclusions were presented on the final day of the Congress in a plenary session where comments and discussion points were invited from participants.

During and after the Congress several satellite meetings were held. A meeting of the Project Group on Material Transfer Policies, led by the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, met at the Kirstenbosch National Botanic Gardens after the meeting. A meeting of the members of the BGCI/IABG European Botanic Gardens Consortium was also held. Following the Congress, the Plants Subcommittee of the IUCN Species Survival Commission who also attended the meeting met for two days in Hermanus. An Education Training Course for Botanic Gardens in Africa was held after the Congress at the Kirstenbosch Gardens, sponsored by the British Council and organized by Ally Ashwell (NBI) and Julia Willison (BGCI). It was attended by delegates from botanic gardens from 14 countries (see News from BGCI p.XX).

Conclusions

The Congress stimulated a wealth of ideas and gave the opportunity for participants not only to exchange information and experiences, but also to share a tremendous enthusiasm for the task in hand.

The Congress ended with a number of conclusions and recommendations but there was also a broad message that many participants will have taken home with them. There was a confirmation, that the botanic gardens of the World play a key role in the sustainable future of our planet. That it is only with the effective development of the botanic garden community's national and international networks and the dedication of their staff, that we can hope to secure the diversity of plants species for the next millennium. As the network grows, it also evolves and more and more individuals and institutions are adopting the conservation message as a part of their mission. We need to promote both one-to-one and multi-lateral twinning in order to support capacity building and the development of national and international strategies.

Clearly information, its management and exchange, is the fundamental tool we use. The development of sound collections databases, based upon the, now widely adopted, International Transfer Format, and the development of collection's policies that take greater account of the conservation needs of their regions, are rapidly becoming key to the success of each gardens mission.

The imminent development of an International Clearing House Mechanism for botanic gardens will promote their effectiveness and support the conservation work they undertake. As individuals and institutions begin to develop their policies and their procedures in response to the Convention on Biological Diversity, they will begin to play a more significant role in its implementation. This will raise the profile of botanic gardens at both national and international levels, and lead to a greater integration between botanic garden conservation activities and those activities of non-garden bodies. Clearly, co-operation with non garden bodies in areas such as species recovery plans, will enable botanic gardens to play an enhanced role in habitat management and restoration ecology and link them with land managers and with in situ conservationists.

Many priorities, however, remain the same; the need for Systematics' to play a pivotal role in botanic gardens, the urgent need for taxonomic training, and the promotion of taxonomy to the general public as a fundamental component of plant conservation. More genebanks are required, particularly in areas of high biodiversity. The ever-present danger of invasive plant species needs to be challenged with research about their control. Fund-raising too, remains high on the agenda. The need to develop broad-based funding opportunities to support plant conservation will involve targeted marketing, imaginative new ideas and innovations along with clear communications.

The Congress gave us all the opportunity to assess not only the current status of the work being undertaken by botanic gardens world-wide but to look into the future. Meeting the challenges of the next few years will require a clear and practical strategy. The concept of a global botanic garden strategy, an International Agenda for Botanic Gardens in Conservation, was born at the Congress. It is hoped that it will be the development of this idea that will focus much of the imagination and optimism witnessed in Cape Town, until the botanic community meet again, at the next Congress in Asheville, USA in the year 2000.

BGCI was gratified to see the support shown by its members, this sustains us even when our tiny body of staff, are threatened by submergence under an ever-expanding workload. But it is with optimism, realism and action that we look to the future.