

GSPC T14 - Meeting the Challenge

Julia Willison

Botanic Gardens Conservation International, Surrey, UK

In 2006, six national meetings were held to look at the implementation of T14 of the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation. The meetings were held in Brazil, China, Indonesia, Russia, UK and the USA. Over 375 representatives from all levels of the formal and informal education sectors participated in the consultation.

Introduction to the GSPC

The Global Strategy for Plant Conservation started out as an initiative from the Botanical Congress in St Louis 1999, which called for plant conservation to be recognised as an urgent international priority. Following this, interested parties met in Gran Canaria, Spain, and produced a declaration. The declaration was presented to the CBD, who then agreed that a specific strategy for plant conservation was needed. The initial production of the Global Strategy was in conjunction with many national and international organisations, such as World Conservation Union (IUCN), International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), WWF, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI),

The GSPC was adopted by the COP to the CBD in 2002.

But why the need for the GSPC?

- There are over 250,000 flowering plant species. Hardly surprising then that the average person on the street wonders what all the fuss is about if a few of these species were to disappear.
- Well the evidence that biodiversity is essential for the proper functioning and sustainability of an ecosystem, is compelling.
- From an anthropocentric perspective, plant diversity is regarded as essential to guarantee the continued security of human food supplies. It is therefore sobering to think that, from an estimated 80,000 species of edible plants, fewer than 20 produce 90% of the world's food. The implications of humankind's dependence on so few species and varieties are worrying, to say the least.
- The problems that beset the banana industry in the 1950s, for example, highlight the perils of overdependence on a single variety. Bananas are the world's most exported fruit, and the fourth most important food commodity after rice, wheat and maize. Half a billion people in Africa and Asia depend on them as a staple food. In the 1950s, the dominant commercial banana, *Gros Michel*, was completely destroyed by the soil-borne Panama disease. The growers' only option was to keep relocating banana plantations to fresh land. By the 1960s, even the mighty United Fruit Company had exhausted its search for new land suitable for banana cultivation. The only way forward was to find a suitable new banana variety. And where did they look for it? Among the wild population, of course.
- As we are all aware, wild varieties are essential for protecting cultivated species from diseases.
- The argument in favour of sustaining and even enhancing species biodiversity is difficult to refute. And yet, as we all know, biodiversity is in mortal peril, with species extinction proceeding at an alarming rate.

- Even last week, a report uncovered the fact that vast tracts of the world's second-largest rainforest in the Congo have been obtained by a small group of European and American industrial logging companies in return for minimal taxes and gifts of salt, sugar and tools. Time does not permit me to explore here the causes of biodiversity loss. But the lessons are plain to see, as is the urgent need to educate people about the importance of plant diversity.
- From a holistic or systemic perspective, all species are interconnected and diversity is fundamental for the health of our planet. One striking illustration of species interdependency followed the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park in the US during the mid to late 1990s. As predicted, the newly reintroduced wolves began to control the park's large and highly successful elk population, which had been devastating the willow, aspen and other woodland that grew along the streams and rivers. The recovery of these woodlands and the restoration of their canopies led to a cooling of the stream flows, with consequential benefits to the native trout population. Nesting habitats for migrating birds were also improved. Beaver feed on willow and their dams create marshland, providing homes for otter, mink and duck.
- There are many other examples, but they and the one's I've described here, all bring us to the same point and a very tough question.

What action can we take to restore the biodiversity balance?

In my view, Target 14 has to be one of the most important of these.

The strategy states that:

“The importance of plant diversity and the need for its conservation [should be] incorporated into communication, educational and public-awareness programmes”

This target is understood to refer to both informal and formal education at all levels, including primary, secondary and tertiary education. Key target audiences include not only children and other students but also policy makers and the general public – in other words, everyone! This is no mean feat and explains why the national meetings included a diverse range of professional opinion.

It is a commonplace that it takes several years to influence changes to the national curriculum. Realistically, therefore, any work undertaken now is unlikely to have much impact on the GSPC targets by 2010. That being said, the importance of educating tomorrow's generation cannot be underestimated.

Turning to informal education, many locations such as, museums, botanic gardens, national trust houses, zoos, etc have 'natural' places for learning about plant diversity and conservation. It may therefore be easier here to influence the incorporation of education about plant diversity and conservation into already established education programmes. Nevertheless, these institutions will only reach a minority of the population and we cannot rely on this path alone to educate the target audiences about plant diversity and conservation.

The ultimate goal of Target 14 is to conserve plants. In an ideal world, perhaps, all we'd have to do is provide information about the importance of plant diversity and the need for conservation and our audience would respond with variations on the theme of: 'Oh, so that's the problem. Well of course we must conserve plants'

As educators, we all know that awareness and recognition of the importance of plant diversity does not necessarily translate into action for conservation and sustainability. Many of us feel strongly that we have lost our connection to nature and that by helping people to reconnect we will become more conscious about minimising our impact on the environment. There is also a strong body of research to back up the belief that plant-based education needs to incorporate a social, political and economic dimension to encourage people to understand better the ways in which they interact with their environment and influence those forces that cause

the loss of plants and diversity. By identifying the root causes, people can be encouraged to develop skills that will enable them to participate in finding solutions.

How BGCI is implementing Target 14 and where we go from here

- We work with partners to ensure that plants are recognized as the world's most important natural resource and initiate practical programmes to safeguard tens of thousands of 'at risk' plant species.
- We work with policy makers to ensure botanic gardens play an integral role in implementing environmental agreements at national and international levels.
- We develop policies, guidelines and tools to support best practice in plant conservation, sustainable development and environmental education
- Promote the value of plants for human well-being and we also engage with a wide range of international and national partners to promote plant conservation.

BGCI has been designated as the lead institute for T14 by the Secretariat to the Convention on Biological Diversity. To date we

- Have held an international stakeholder consultation
- Have contributed to the UK response to the GSPC
- Have surveyed BGEN members about their education contribution to the GSPC
- produce Roots (the biannual education review)
- produce guidelines to support the development of education in botanic gardens
- run an education website (www.bgci.org) which provides information on plant-based education.
- Assist in the development of botanic garden education programmes
- Have coordinated six national workshops on Target 14

The results of the six workshops were collated into a report presented to an international GSPC expert liaison meeting that took place in Dublin in November 2006. The recommendations of the report were accepted at the meeting and will be presented to the next SBSTTA meeting in Paris this July. I will show these briefly following the presentations from my colleagues on the results of their national meetings. Copies of the report are also available for anyone interested on www.bgci.org/plants2010/consultation_T14/