

• *You talk to Plant Talk!* •

'The Fall of Giants'

Paul Cox's recent editorial 'The Fall of Giants' raises many issues: we would like to comment on the question of fieldwork. While it is true that today one is as likely to find a botanist peering at a computer screen as observing plants in the field or comparing specimens in the herbarium, this is largely a reflection of the expansion of knowledge and techniques and of changes in our work practices that affect people in all walks of life. It is a major challenge to those responsible for devising training programmes to ensure that they combine molecular approaches to conservation and systematics with a proper knowledge and appreciation of the morphology, structure and function of plants and animals, as well as their existence as dynamic living populations in nature.

On the positive side, we would like to draw attention to the thriving tradition of field botany that characterizes many university departments in Spain, Italy, Turkey and other Mediterranean countries. Spain in particular has built upon the former predominantly phytosociological emphasis that required extensive field surveys to be carried out and has adapted this tradition in the remarkable resurgence of plant taxonomic research in that country in the past 20 years. Students and staff alike make regular, often weekly, visits to the field and have acquired an extensive profound knowledge of the flora. This is reflected not only in *Flora Iberica*, one of the great floristic enterprises of our age, but in the impressive series of studies and publications from university departments, botanic gardens, environment agencies and local authorities on the identification, assessment, conservation biology and ethnobotany of endangered species, and of the ecosystems in which they occur.

An emphasis on a broad approach to plant science, embracing both organismal and molecular approaches and including field work, has survived despite financial and other pressures at the University of Reading in the UK. All final-year undergraduates still undertake a two-week field course to Mediterranean Spain following a tradition started by one of us (VHH) in 1969. The MSc in Plant Diversity has three streams: Taxonomy & Evolution, Conservation & Biodiversity, and Vegetation Survey & Assessment, and all MSc students undertake fieldwork in

Spain. Research projects on Mediterranean floras or vegetation are encouraged. Departmental research includes major floristic field-based projects in Morocco and Lebanon as well as extensive research in molecular systematics and bioinformatics.



▲ Fieldwork in Morocco

Of course, none of this ensures the emergence of giants like Ledyard Stebbins, Herbert Baker or Richard Evans Schultes, each of whom was unique, but the 'foot-soldiers' of botany will continue to come from various centres in different parts of the world (not just those we have mentioned by way of example). There will never be enough of them and the problem is to ensure that the need for them continues to be recognized – as Paul Cox rightly makes clear. It is encouraging in this regard that the Convention on Biological Diversity's Global Taxonomy Initiative has an essentially practical emphasis, with a focus on inventory, sampling, collections and training.

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Théodore Monod

I was a bit disappointed and saddened to see in the July issue of *PLANT TALK* how short was the paragraph dedicated to Théodore Monod. Théodore Monod passed away at the age of 98, after a long and brilliant scientific career. He created his own Society for Natural History and edited a self-written scientific bulletin at the age of 15! He graduated in geology in 1920, then completed a thesis on isopods (woodlice) at the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle in Paris, where he eventually became Professor in 1942. He entered the French Academy of Science in 1963.

He was not a specialist (contrary to most scientists nowadays), and his knowledge was encyclopaedic – indeed he was sometimes criticized as an "18th century encyclopaedist". His work – some 1000 scientific publications – embraced zoology, botany and geology. He studied both marine and terrestrial ecosystems, especially desert ecology. His herbarium, which he started in



▲ Théodore Monod, as depicted in his book *Le chercheur d'absolu*.

1923 in Mauritania, included at least 4800 specimens. His name is commemorated in more than 30 plant species.

Théodore Monod was a well known public figure – an indefatigable and ascetic traveller, who crossed the Sahara several times. A true ecologist, he campaigned for nature protection in France. He was also a humanist, fighting against Nazism in the 1940s, the Algerian war in the 1960s, and in recent decades against the hunting lobby, racism and poverty. He promoted peace and respect for life and nature.

For many generations of French students and researchers in biology and ecology, such as myself, Théodore Monod was model, mentor and hero. He was certainly the most eminent French naturalist, explorer and environmentalist of the 20th Century. I hope he will not be the last.

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Still, the signs around the Heavenly Lake were very encouraging. My two favourite sentiments were “Grasses wave in the breeze as if to say ‘Please do not tread on us’” and “Flowers and trees cannot talk but they have lives” (below). These signs are written in English, Chinese and Kazak (which uses the Arabic alphabet). Heavenly Lake is east of Urumqi in Xianjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China.

Juanita A.R. Ladyman
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▲ Juanita Ladyman beside the sign at Heavenly Lake

Labels with imagination in China

I was interested to read in the July 2001 issue of *PLANT TALK* about the labelling of native flora in England. I also found some interesting signs in China. On a trip to China in October 2000 I made a visit to Heavenly Lake (Tian Chi) that, according to one legend, was formed by the tears of Xi Wang Mu, the immortal Queen Mother of the West, when her lover left for the East over 3,000 years ago. This area now belongs to the Kazak peoples, a minority ethnic group in northwestern China. The area is being developed into a tourist destination and quite deserves its reputation for exceptionally beautiful scenery and a fascinating tribal culture. The landscape is enchanting with towering snow-capped mountains, shimmering lakes and expansive forests. Picturesque yurts, spirited horses, and fuzzy cute cows dot the lower slopes. However, for any botanist or ecologist, it is evident that intensive grazing by sheep, goats, horses and other livestock both currently and what must be over hundreds, if not thousands, of years has certainly taken its toll on the vegetation. The ground cover and soil condition was reminiscent of over-grazed regions of the southwestern United States.

Finding jobs

I am a devoted reader of *PLANT TALK* and look forward to each new issue. I am not sure if the readership would find it useful but I would like to suggest that you include a column of job vacancies for people like me (Kew Diploma, MSc Horticulture Reading). This could open an opportunity to grow plants, in a conservation context, in countries which may be in need of enthusiastic young botanical horticulturists. I would be delighted for any suggestions you may have.

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Good idea! In fact we had been considering such an idea ourselves, covering jobs in botany, plant conservation and related fields, but we already have our hands full getting out the magazine each quarter with our tiny staff. Our inclination would be to do a “jobs mart” on the web site rather than in the published magazine, since a quarterly is too infrequent for this purpose. Any reactions and comments would be most welcome. And if any reader has a job to offer Bernd, please get in touch with him on Bernd246@hotmail.com – Ed.