

PLANTLIFE AGM – 25 NOVEMBER 2000

PLANT CONSERVATION IN SCOTLAND IN THE 21ST CENTURY: ROGER CROFTS, SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE

Introduction

- Plants are important in their own right for a whole range of reasons. Too often rare, endangered and exotic species receive a great deal more attention compared with the commonplace.
- I wish to consider why plants are important in our society in the 21st Century. And consider ingredients for greater success in plant conservation in Scotland and the wider world.

Why are plants important?

- **Plants are declining:** Globally, the 2000 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species shows 45% plants low risk, 30% vulnerable, over 20% endangered. Some declines in recent years. In UK, 21 native flowering plants gone in 150 years. Also local disappearance 'Where have all the flowers gone' eg meadows and hedgerow. Your '*bring back from the brink campaign*' is a notable success here.
- **Plants are indicators of environmental health:** we have been lead to believe that animals, most particularly birds, are the best indicators of the health of our environment. The DETR list of sustainable development indicators totally ignores plants and yet I am sure all of you would agree that routine sampling of plant diversity and plant health as just as good indicators as any other in terms of carrying capacity of the soil, the impact of climatic change, the impact of land management operations.

- **Plants are charismatic:** it never ceases to surprise me, and give me pleasure, that stories about plants are easily placed in the broad sheet national newspaper (at least in Scotland). Newspaper editors often have great difficulty in explaining the point except to recognise strong public interest. Also plants, particularly flowering plants, are becoming much more commonplace on calendars and in photographs. Indeed they are the sort of thing that drive some of us very happily to the countryside and to the hills in any country to photograph them and then cover our walls with them.
- **Plants can be bought:** growth of gardening, garden centres, TV and radio gardening programmes and presentations.
- **Plants can be re-introduced:** the days of the collection of plants for personal glorification seem to have long since past and there is now strong public voluntary and private support for reintroduction for those species which have been lost for whatever reason. The continuing public support for, for instance, the joint RBGE/SNH reintroduction of plants such as the sticky catchfly in my backyard at Holyrood Park in Edinburgh, and the pillwort there and on Rum are good examples.
- It is therefore a pretty obvious conclusion that not only are plants important but we should be ensuring that the wider population also recognises this. We should be stopping declines of both rare and commonplace. We therefore need much greater celebration of the importance of plants for their own sake and for their benefits to people.
- Improving success in plant conservation and the measure of their wider importance is not an easy task despite the success of Plantlife and the wider Planta Europa programme.

Ingredients for Plant Conservation Success

- I consider that there are five key ingredients for increasing the success of plant conservation: better understanding of the needs for plant conservation, improving conservation delivery on the ground, enhanced and better focussed government support, support from the wider community including commercial sources, and leadership on plant conservation.

1. Understanding plant conservation needs

- **Identify trends in native plant species** and the action which is required to ensure that the trends are in a positive direction. This means, firstly, assessing the resource. The important plant areas approach, recently supported to the World Conservation Congress, and the work of Plantlife and the Pan European Planta Europa programme are excellent moves in the right direction. Clearly they need continuing support and simulation – a point to which I will return later.
- **plant ecology approaches** to place plants in their wider habitat context are vitally important. Those, like your President, are clear leaders in this field but we now have fewer trained ecologists, and that needs to be rectified. Stimulation of plant ecology and the long-term monitoring and evaluation of trends is therefore a vitally important ingredient.
- Equally, **understanding the techniques of restoration, reintroduction and reinstatement**, and turning from loss to gain, are required. I sometimes look with slight trepidation at the lack of underpinning science. For instance, when we restore wetlands we have not got all the science we need, for instance, in parts of the Flow Country.

- And **understanding what causes declines**: for example, over-grazing, changing agritechnology, changing crop patterns, climate change.

2. Improving Delivery on the ground

- Inevitably in Britain, we have a very high dependency on **site protection measures**. Our scientific knowledge, our values, and our understanding of protected area mechanisms have improved considerably and these sites and areas will remain the core of plant and habitat protection.
- In order to maintain and enhance floristic health and diversity over **wide areas** of the country, we need wider area approaches which certainly do exist on the European or British statute books. In SNH we maintain our view that wider area measures, evolved from the concept which underline biosphere reserves, are the most appropriate. These recognise that some areas are more important than others, core protected zones surrounded by zones of lighter protection within a wider area matrix of environmentally sensitive measures seem to us to be the right way forward. Our natural heritage zone programme which identify our vision for the 21 distinctive bio-geographic zones of Scotland is, I hope, help in this direction.
- In a nation where public **ownership of land** is unlikely to increase significantly and, could well, under certain political considerations further decline, then it does not provide much of the answer. Whilst the land holdings of bodies like SNH, English Nature and CCW are important, they play a relatively small part. The rise therefore of land ownership by voluntary and environmental organisations, such as Plantlife, is strongly welcomed by bodies like SNH. It is

therefore vitally important that you and others in the field, such as SWT, NTS, JMT and RSPB, continue to increase your capacity to manage these areas to achieve the broader vision. Alongside this, is the need to continue to encourage the NHMF Trustees to disperse more funds for the purchase and management of land for plant conservation in Britain. We hope that our joint endeavours a few weeks ago will help to give added focus on key plant species. In addition, it is vitally important that HLF has both knowledgeable and sympathetic technical advisors, so that we do not have a repeat of Cour Woods case.

- SNH strongly supports the **Important Plant Areas** approach and hopes that it will be implemented through the evolving Natura 2000 programme. I would hate to see yet another Directive for plant areas alongside the one for birds when we have so many broader habitats and plant species included in the relevant annexes to the Habitat and Species Directive. The speed of implementation will no doubt be a little frustrating for you because of the time which it has taken for governments across Europe to bring forward their proposals and, in turn, for the European Commission to come to any views. I doubt if we will have any SACs formally designated for another three-years or so. In the meantime you should be closely examining the proposals put forward by Member States (with the help of the European Topic Centre for Nature Conservation in Paris) to check the read across between IPAs and candidate SACs.

3. Focusing Government Support

- The most important role for Governments is to stimulate **improvements in land management**. On arable land the menu should be: reduced and more targeted inputs of fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides, and the stimulation of long-term set aside and buffer strips around the edge of fields. All of these are easily

within the grasp of the UK Government, if it is willing to do so. On livestock areas, we need much more fundamental changes. There are still far too many areas, for instance on lowland grasslands and upland heaths, where we have evidence of both over-grazing and under management. The production support system is basically not working to fulfil wider environmental objectives. Although the gradual switch from headage to area payments is a welcome step, the amount of resources devoted to agri-environment programmes in the government's modulation proposals, especially in Scotland, are really quite inadequate for the purposes. We need to move more radically and faster if we are to achieve the broader based environmental objectives, within which improved conservation of habitats and their dependent species are key elements.

- There has been a welcome recognition by the government in England and Scotland of **greater financial assistance to the conservation agencies** which has enabled us to place many more funds in support of biodiversity programmes. The Species and Habitat Action Programmes and Local Biodiversity Action Programmes have very significantly energised the system and resulted in more partnership work which will result in the near future in improved conservation effort.

4. Wider Community support

- It is a truism that Britain is nation of **gardeners** and yet we have not succeeded in catching the imagination or the action of gardeners to benefit plant biodiversity. One of the SNH initiatives which has given me most pleasure is 'Plant for Wildlife'. It is based on the very simple premise that, in re-engineering our window boxes and back gardens, we stimulate a wider range of plant life throughout the seasons providing we have the right information. More support for these type of approaches is needed, perhaps including

Gardeners Question Time on Radio 4 and with the help of the many TV gardening programmes and the various garden pundits.

- The **commercial gardening centre industry** is a very profitable one and continues to grow. However, it is difficult to find the link between good plant conservation and the activities of many of these centres, although we have had some success with our 'Plant for Wildlife' campaign for which we are very grateful to some of the major centres in Scotland. We ought to be further stimulating the industry to ensure that availability of native, rather than alien, plants is more a matter of course and that the wider wildlife benefits of these are well known to garden centre managers and staff as well as to purchasers. I congratulate Plantlife and Flora Locale for what has been achieved and the publication of 'Planting with Wildlife in mind'.
- Allied to this there need to be much stimulation to **alternatives to non-renewable** or slowly renewable resources, such as peat. Whilst B&Q is a leading light, many other commercial gardening centres have not followed this through. There are perfectly good alternatives which have a more appropriate level of alkalinity and do not have such damaging effects at the point of extraction.
- Also we must place greater pressure on those less scrupulous operators who continue to **pillage areas of native plants, notably the bluebells** of Southern English woods, or the native primroses, for their own commercial purposes without realising they are not just wrecking a habitat but despoiling the countryside for other people. Is this really any different from the theft of rare eggs from a raptor nest in the Scottish highlands?
- **Engaging wider community support** is a hope of ours as part of the Local Communities and Heritage Initiative which is being funded

by HLF. To persuade local communities about the importance of the environment and what makes them tick and what they can do to improve the situation ought to be of benefit for plant conservation as well as for other species. I know that Plantlife recognise this and you are actively targeting gardening organisations.

- And, of course, most serious of all is the issue of releases of **manipulated organisms**, genetically and otherwise, which already have very significant effects and which will no doubt do so in future. Much greater regulation as SNH and the other country agencies have called for, along with clear controls on pilot tests and thorough risk assessment at the end of these tests are the critical ingredients.
- Also we must not forget the impact of **alien invasive species**, probably the most damaging trend of all and one which is very difficult to halt.
- One thing that strikes me from a more traditional agricultural society is the concept of **sustainable use of plant resources**. I do not wish to steal the thunder of the Scottish Officer of Plantlife and talk about Juniper Gin but Michael has a very significant point here which I hope we can do something about. There is still a strong folklore in Britain about the various health uses of plants and yet these are not put to any effect whatsoever. If one goes to Cuba for instance then there are government run health centres which are treating people with native plant species. One fundamental gap in the UK's approach to the delivery of the original biological diversity is its lack of sustainable use initiatives which are worthy of the name in the context of the Directive. Even simulating the growth of various sorts of mints for the production of fresh mint tea (which I first savoured recently in Jordan) would be better than nothing would. I understand that you are considering appointing a new

Scottish Conservation Officer to take these type of initiatives forward. I wish you well.

5. Getting the leadership

- All parts of nature need leadership and the plant kingdom is no exception. Whilst there have been very longstanding plant and botanical societies in various part of the UK, the advent of Plantlife has resulted in a signal change with more focus, vision and vitality. But an effective working partnership with the statutory agencies is also vital. It has been a great pleasure that the relationship between SNH (even before the appointment of our current Deputy Chairman and before I signed up for membership personally) had developed such a relationship. I earnestly believe that that should continue if we are to achieve a greater status and standing for plants not just within the conservation community but within the wider civil society. I congratulate the leadership of David Bellamy as President, Michael Scott as Scottish Officer and most of all Adrian Darby as Chairman and Jane Smart as Director. Starting in England, expanding to the rest of Britain, and now leading in Europe through Planta Europa is a wonderful achievement. And next the global plant initiative please.

18 October 2000

W:\secretar\speeches\Plantlife AGM 2000