

Our Chairman writes on plant conservation: our future

As Plantlife approaches its 20th anniversary, getting the message about plant conservation across is more vital than ever. At the end of his first year as Plantlife's Chairman, Roger Crofts focuses on the need to protect plant diversity and highlights how Plantlife's work will contribute in the future.

When Plantlife was established in 1989, attention focused on getting the message over about the importance of protecting plants in the wild. Today, this is still a vital message. If the role of plants is ignored, then great concepts such as sustainability, ecosystem services and biodiversity conservation will come to nothing.

Why protect plants? This is rather a rhetorical question for readers of *Plantlife* magazine but it is nevertheless worth reflecting on this in the light of concerns about the future of the environment, climate change, increasing demand for plants for food and renewable energy, and the very survival of society.

First, we need to ensure wild plants do not become extinct as they are important for their own sake: the ethical reason. Second, maintaining the diversity and health of plants and the places in which they grow is important when there is continuing fragmentation of these habitats due to infrastructure development, intensification of agriculture and destruction of native forests. Third, plants are a vital component of natural systems: they are an intrinsic part of the food chain, ensure the stability of the soil and help to store water. Fourth, plants may in the future provide answers to feeding human populations and providing new sources of medicine. Finally, we should recognise the vital role that semi-natural habitats play in mitigating the effects of climate change: they are natural arteries for species migration, store carbon, especially in bogs and mires, and offer the possibility of increasing the supply of food for a growing population.

If this all sounds very high blown, it is not meant to. Plants are at the heart of a future for human life on earth and this means ensuring that the message of conserving wild plants in their natural surroundings is known and understood by everyone. Scientists have a key role to play in improving our knowledge of plant distribution and the factors that make them survive or fail. Surveyors and recorders are important for measuring changes in their distribution. Volunteers are vital in removing invasive species and restoring plant habitats. Communicators, particularly in the media and in the classroom, have a key role in making sure society respects and supports plant conservation. And funders are needed to ensure that the resources required are made available. All Plantlife members and everyone else who has an interest in our future can play an active role.

Plantlife's contribution will be to champion action on a number of fronts. We will continue to protect rare and threatened plants and restore habitats. We will foster increased volunteer involvement in this work and in recording plant distribution through our public participation surveys. We will review the focus of our activities on our reserves and plan to use them more effectively to promote interest in plants and increasing engagement in their care. We will argue for the removal of those policies of governments in the UK and the European Union that get in the way of plant conservation and their replacement by policies that actively support it. We will promote the identification of the best areas for plants in as many European countries as possible through our Important Plant Areas programme. We will continue our encouragement of local communities in east Africa and the Himalayas to get the best out of their traditional knowledge of their native plants. And we will bring the message of plant conservation to the kitchen and the living room, to the garden and the park, and to the roadside verge and the arable field.

We hope to hear your ideas, as our readers and members, for the future and what you can contribute to the great crusade of making wild plants the very essence of life.

Roger Crofts
Chairman of the Board of Trustees
Plantlife International