

Orchid Research Newsletter No. 52

When Phillip Cribb established the *Orchid Research Newsletter* in the early 1980s – in the last century and even the last millennium – it was typewritten, copied, stapled, and mailed out to more than 100 orchid scientists around the world. At that time, neologisms such as 'upload', 'e-mail', 'online', 'laptop', and 'defragmenting' were jargon used only by those with pocket protectors and inadequate trouser inseams; spam was only a meat product (Spam) and a parody by Monty Python ("Spamalot"). Almost 30 years later, those terms and a host of bewildering acronyms are used routinely in every office environment and home, and Spam (the meat product) is still not only on the shelves but by some accounts selling better than ever as a way to deal with inflationary food prices.

Eric Hoffer (1902-1983), the self-educated American longshoreman, self-styled philosopher, and author of *The True Believer* (1951), was a respected social commentator and analyst of mass movements. In the Hoffer corpus is one spellbinding observation that rings clear to those of us who have seen the revolutionary changes of the last 50 years: "In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists."

Digitization of our civilization over the course of the last few decades has been a blessing to learners but a bane to the learned. To be sure, e-mail is a mixed blessing for both. Although it has made communication instantaneous and thereby more effective, it has also increased our workload; it is not uncommon for someone, say, an orchid scientist, to receive more than 50 e-mails a day from colleagues, all of whom have come to expect an equally instantaneous reply.

The *Orchid Research Newsletter* became exclusively electronic in July 2003, saving the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, hundreds of pounds a year in international postage. Another advantage to this format was that it could not be lost in transit or hijacked in route by overzealous, orchidophilic postal carriers slaving to see the newest orchid names and references. Okay, that last bit may be exaggeration, but the point is that current and archived copies of the *ORN* can now be delivered by downloading directly, safely, cheaply, and literally in seconds all around the world from RBG Kew's website with only a few clicks. For some there may be a tactile need to turn a page manually or caress a book's binding, but, as any publisher suffering losses in book sales will tell you, sorry, those days are numbered. One media investment firm has predicted that Internet advertising spending will overtake print newspaper advertising in 2010 as the largest advertising category, as people increasingly go online for information and entertainment. The handwriting is on the (virtual) wall.

As reported below, holotypes and even entire herbaria have been and are being digitized and uploaded onto institutional websites, which will ensure at least their virtual existence in the event of natural disasters, warfare, insect damage and otherwise poor curation, theft, etc. The Missouri Botanical Garden and Harvard University are

also busy scanning literature of historical significance. At this writing in June 2008, Missouri's *Botanicus* (www.botanicus.org) has 395 titles (books/journals), 1,911 volumes, 876,885 pages, and 170,579 links to protologues online. Gustavo Romero of Harvard has informed me that "Google is currently digitizing all the books in the Orchid Library of Oakes Ames that do not have copyright issues." The value of these electronic versions is inestimable to the orchid researcher unable or unwilling to travel to examine type specimens or monographs in person.

Change is mainstream in every walk of life, and indeed history is simply a chronicle of changes through time. But in the 21st century, the rate of technological change itself is rising exponentially, raising the spectre of machines claiming the same civil rights as humans by 2029 according to the highly respected, consulted, and awarded futurist, Ray Kurzweil. His forecast for 2099? By then there will be no distinction between humans and computers, when humans will have acquired optical, cochlear, and neural implants and machines will have imported scans of the human brain. For more on these fascinating subjects, I encourage you to read his books, *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (1999) and *The Singularity Is Near* (2005). Paraphrasing Hoffer, how we deal with new technologies -- whether we embrace them or reject them in favour of the "better-the-devil-you-know" status quo -- will determine our level of success in the future, perhaps even our own survival as a species.

Alec Pridgeon

News from Correspondents

Please submit any news about newly completed research, future research plans and needs, change of address, upcoming or recent fieldwork, etc. to David Roberts (d.roberts@kew.org). Graduate students are especially encouraged to share the subjects of their thesis or dissertation with the international community. We will print submissions in the format used below. Many thanks to those who have contributed.

Acharya, Kamal Prasad (Department of Biology, Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, University of Bergen, Norway; e-mail: acharya.kamal@gmail.com) has recently completed his research on orchid species richness along a Himalayan elevation gradient. His study was based on orchids from Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, and surrounding areas.

Dawson, Murray I. (Allan Herbarium, Landcare Research, P.O. Box 40, Lincoln 7640, New Zealand; e-mail: dawsonm@landcareresearch.co.nz) and his colleagues Brian Molloy and Ernst Beuzenberg recently published chromosome numbers for the majority of the New Zealand indigenous orchids (*New Zealand Journal of Botany* 45:

611-684. A much-shortened popular version in two parts has also been submitted to the *New Zealand Native Orchid Group Journal*.

About 75% of the species representing all 36 genera in New Zealand now have chromosome counts. Related chromosome counts are also provided from Australia, Lord Howe Island, and New Caledonia, and many species and genera are counted for the first time. A wide diversity of chromosome morphology and primary and secondary basic numbers among genera was reported (e.g., $x/x_2 = 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 27$). They also reported on polyploidy (*Drymoanthus*, *Microtis*, *Nematoceras*), allopolyploidy (*Thelymitra*), and extensive aneuploidy. The chromosome data have proven informative and provided independent characters to test the integrity of the recent and extensive generic recircumscriptions of Australasian Orchidaceae based on plant macromorphology and DNA sequence data.

Upcoming Conferences

We welcome any news about future conferences for promotion here. Please send details to David Roberts (d.roberts@kew.org) as far in advance of the event as possible, remembering that the *Orchid Research Newsletter* is published only in January and July of each year.

4-8 February 2009

The Third Scientific Conference on Andean Orchids will be held 4-8 February 2009 in Quito, Ecuador. Three days of world-class talks on orchid systematics, ecology, and conservation science will be complemented by poster sessions, roundtable programs on a variety of subjects, a spectacular orchid show in the Itchimbia Cultural Center, and special evening dinner events. As for prior, highly successful Conferences in this series, there will be local tours and orchid tours operated by Ecuagenera, but what makes this event special is also the link for tours to the Galapagos. The impressive, bilingual Conference website (www.QUITOORCHIDEXPO2009.ORG) is now online to supply more information.

Digitization of Herbarium Specimens

Several institutions around the world are now scanning their herbaria to make specimens more accessible to scientists and the general public for systematics and conservation uses. One of the first orchid herbaria digitized was the Reichenbach Herbarium and available as a set of 265 microfiches, representing 9,000 sheets, from IDC publishers (www.idcpublishers.com) for a few thousand dollars.

The digital programme of the Herbarium at RBG Kew began in 2002. A subset of over 316,000 specimens and about 89,000 types out of the 7 million dried and liquid-preserved specimens altogether have been prioritized for scanning. To date, there are over 109,000 digital images (with collection data) of pressed and spirit-preserved

specimens; of these, almost 65,000 are types. To search for digital images online, go to <http://apps.kew.org/herbcat/navigator.do> and enter the query by family, scientific name, country or collector. You may also conduct more specific searches under Advanced Search. Searching under Orchidaceae now yields over 46,000 records. There are 4,300 type specimens among 364 genera now in the Catalogue, but not all have been scanned as yet. Records can also be downloaded, at no charge of course.

According to an article earlier this year in *The Linnean* (24: 8-11), the Linnean Society of London is responsible for curating 14,300 specimens in the Linnaean Herbarium. Digitization of those specimens began in January 2006 and was completed in August 2007. *A Catalogue of the Linnaean Herbarium* by Spencer Savage (1945) was previously put into electronic form in the 1990s to support this project. At www.linnean-online.org/, one can browse all 14,300 plant collections by genus from *Abroma* to *Zygophyllum*. The Flash-based Single Source Image (FSI) Viewer allows the user to zoom in and move around the image of a specimen, even measure where needed. You can also search using any of 10 different fields or all at once. Registration as a user on the site allows additional perks, such as saved searches, bookmarked items, and comments. Comments or questions can be directed to Julia Hoare at Julia@linnean.org.

Harvard University Herbaria have placed images of all of their types and specimens of historical or diagnostic value on the Internet, accompanied by label data and also in many cases by the protologue, original description of the species, and associated illustration(s). The digital collection of currently 20,820 entries can be accessed on the Harvard Herbaria Database at http://asaweb.huh.harvard.edu:8080/databases/specimen_index.html. According to Gustavo Romero, of the 20,820 entries, 8,786 are types of different categories. Workers have already digitized 8,607 of these types, the images of which can be found using the same search page indicated above. The orchid-type imaging project was financed by Harvard University's Library Digital Initiative.

If your institution has a similar project in progress or planned, please let us know by writing to David Roberts (d.roberts@kew.org). We would like to include that information in the next issue (January 2009) for the benefit of our readers.

Recent Orchid Nomenclature

New orchid names may now be accessed on the IPNI website:

(www.ipni.org/ipni/plantsearch?request_type=search&output_format=query&ret_defaults=on)

Click on "Show additional search items" on the right-hand side of the screen. After the search page appears, type in **Orchidaceae** under family name and (for example) **2005-11-30** under "Record date" and "Added since." This will pull up a list of all names added to the IPNI database since 30 November 2005.

Recent Literature

We are grateful to Ann McNeil, compiler of the Kew Record of Taxonomic Literature, and to Hannah Banks and Margaret Ramsay for drawing our attention to the following publications received between 4 January and 27 June 2008.

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