

Royal Botanic Gardens
Kew

**History, equity and
inclusion at the
Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew**

2022

Version - 1.0

Context & Findings

In March 2021 RBG Kew published its new strategy for the period to 2030. We called it our Manifesto for Change and we sought to align everything RBG Kew does towards addressing the global challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change. Our mission is to understand and protect plants and fungi for the benefit of humanity and the future of all life on earth.

Kew's strategy set out five priorities:

1. Deliver science-based knowledge and solutions to protect biodiversity and use natural resources sustainably
2. Inspire people to protect the natural world
3. Train the next generation of experts
4. Extend our reach
5. Influence national and international opinion and policy.

As part of that strategy, and as part of our wider work on equality, diversity and inclusion, we set up a History Equity and Inclusion Working Group involving a range of Kew employees to review our work. Its scope included Kew's history, public engagement, collections management and scientific research and it contributes to the five priorities above.

This has drawn on similar work undertaken by many of our collections-based peer organisations and partners with whom we consulted widely and learned from. We are grateful for their help and advice.

The working group's findings are presented within five interlinked themes, each with associated recommendations and actions:

1. History and heritage

RBG Kew's collections, including our Living Collections, are shaped by the organisation's histories. It is recommended that RBG Kew examines its history and heritage and how that influences the present. We recommend that Kew continues to support a programme of historic and social research integrated with Kew's overall strategy.

2. Public engagement

Everyone should feel welcome in RBG Kew's gardens and when engaging with RBG Kew's content, irrespective of their background or socio-economic status.

RBG Kew needs to gain a better understanding of its audiences and to remove barriers to participation. The experience of audiences, including visitors to our sites, is enriched by open, honest, and confident communication of RBG Kew's histories. What RBG Kew chooses to say, or not say, reflects what it is as an institution today. To better serve all audiences and to amplify the voices of collaborators, RBG Kew needs to revise its guidelines on messaging and tone of voice.

3. Collections and data

Digital access to RBG Kew's global collections will provide many benefits, including universal access (for example, due to the practical inability of many researchers to travel to Kew to visit the collections).

Contemporary collecting practice should take account of protocols for working with local communities, beyond national legislation, and engage with new forms of co-curation, including for sacred, secret or spiritual items in RBG Kew's collections.

RBG Kew will continue to engage in the live discussions with national and international museums to develop a policy for considering repatriation requests. This is an essential prerequisite mandated by The Arts Council for RBG Kew to achieve [museum accreditation](#), a process that is underway. Any policy will need to acknowledge and respect the 1983 National Heritage Act which provides clear guidance on the conditions that would need to be fulfilled, in that items may only be repatriated if they are a duplicate or are considered unsuitable for retention or not useful.¹ The policy should encompass both objects of cultural significance to source communities (in our Economic Botany Collection) and biological specimens, such as those held in the herbarium. These discussions will be guided by the recent Arts Council Guidance; [Restitution and Repatriation: A Practical Guide for Museums in England](#).

4. Research culture

RBG Kew works in partnership with over 400 organisations and institutions in more than 100 countries. It is often the larger and better-resourced partner and so it is important that RBG Kew continues to actively build and maintain equitable partnerships. Establishing a dedicated research ethics committee, with subsequent updating of research policy, is necessary.

Access to research publications is essential to maximising our scientific impact. Many RBG Kew publications on non-UK species and ecosystems are currently not easily always available to all scientists. Whenever possible, open access publication of academic books and journal articles should be supported, along with language translations of projects' key outputs.

5. Organisational culture

Delivery of this paper's recommendations will require engagement with RBG Kew's workforce. A clear public position on history and heritage will empower staff and enable external stakeholders to understand how this work translates into actions.

Our staff have made clear they would welcome opportunities to explore questions relating to Kew's history and heritage. A training programme for staff and new starters can achieve this.

Knowledge exchange with colleagues within the museum and heritage sector has a significant role to play in facilitating change. Line managers and mentors should support staff participation in these wider sector conversations.

¹ National Heritage Act 1983, Section 27 Acquisition and disposal of objects

Recommendations and Actions

1. Developing our understanding of Kew's history and heritage

- **Encourage and facilitate research of RBG Kew's history & collections, from diverse perspectives**
 - Develop a research plan for exploring RBG Kew's histories as a scientific and cultural institution [A1]
 - Build on existing research² to establish a Centre for Plant Humanities as a focal point for further developing partnerships for the cross-disciplinary study of the cultural, economic and social use of plants and plant materials [A2]
 - Develop multiple research strands with national and international collaborators, actively inviting diverse perspectives [A3]

2. Broadening public engagement

- **Increase understanding of RBG Kew's current and potential audiences**
 - Commission research into physical and digital audiences, identifying and addressing barriers to engagement [A4]
 - Develop collaborative research, using community-based methods, into effective public engagement with under-represented communities [A5]
- **Remove barriers in access to RBG Kew's sites and public programmes**
 - Make provision for sustained funding to improve engagement with under-represented physical and digital audiences [A6]
- **Reveal and enrich RBG Kew's histories for Kew's audiences**
 - Continue re-assessment of current interpretation, content and strategies; prioritise and implement selected changes to broaden access and engagement [A7]
 - Strengthen and extend the role of national and international collaboration in public engagement, through community groups and other institutions [A8]
- **Develop effective and inclusive language for all forms of public engagement**
 - Revise RBG Kew's guidance on tone of voice, amplifying the voices of collaborators, drawing on guidance & best practice from other organisations [A9]

3. Universal access to our collections and data

- **Recognise that digital access is essential for collections research**
 - Embed universal access to our collections and data in Science Strategy Priority 3 (Digital revolution) and in reporting to Trustees [A10]
- **Ensure consistent open access to RBG Kew's digitised collections**
 - Establish a data-governance framework for RBG Kew, including clarity and consistency on access [A11]
 - Develop a structured plan and provide resources for comprehensively cataloguing and digitising of all RBG Kew's science and heritage collections [A12]
 - Apply consistent digital access policies across RBG Kew collections, with open access as best practice [A13]

² Funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)

- **Recognise shared interests in curation of collections**
 - Engage with new forms of shared curation [A14]
 - Develop institutional policy on the past terminology used in cataloguing collections [A15]
 - Develop and implement a policy for how we consider any requests for repatriation of specimens, as required in the museums sector [A16]

4. Strengthen our research culture

- **Implement an effective ethics framework tailored to RBG Kew research and fieldwork**
 - Implement a Research Ethics Committee for (a) human subject research and (b) wider ethics issues affecting scientific research [A17]
 - Update RBG Kew's policies on capacity building, knowledge exchange and infrastructure, language, publication, open data, authorship and plant naming [A18]
 - Review overseas fieldwork procedures and training to ensure consistent quality in fieldwork. Review Access and Benefit-Sharing and other science policies [A19]
 - Continue to develop support for open-access publications [A20]

5. Build our organisational culture

- **Give greater clarity and visibility to RBG Kew's resources and work relevant to this paper**
 - Establish a public-facing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion webpage, including a clear statement of values, policies and plans relating to this work [A21]
 - A22 Give greater digital visibility of RBG Kew's activities relevant to this paper [A22]
- **Ensure diversity and inclusion are at the heart of workforce understanding of RBG Kew's values**
 - Develop a training programme to ensure that all Kew staff have the skills and understanding required to work effectively in culturally diverse contexts [A23]
- **Work with the wider science and cultural sector on policy and knowledge exchange**
 - Actively participate in related organisational networks [A24]
 - Ensure managers actively support staff to engage in relevant discussions in new or existing networks as part of their role [A25]