

## Plant Life of South-West Asia Symposia: VI – Past and Future

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The start of any new symposium in a series covering more than 30 years is an appropriate time to recall some background history, especially for new and younger participants, and at the same time look to the future.

In the 1960s there was, throughout the world, much emphasis on writing modern scientific Floras. Nowhere was this more apparent than in south-west Asia. A number were underway and some volumes or fascicles published. In Vienna, the late great K.H. Rechinger had initiated *Flora Iranica* covering the highland areas of Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Beirut, the Jesuit Father Mouterde was working almost single-handedly on the text and illustrations for his *Nouvelle Flore de Syrie et Liban*. In Rawalpindi, the American R.R. Stewart was working on his *Annotated Checklist of the Plants of West Pakistan*. This was the solid precursor of the subsequent *Flora of Pakistan*, with its editorial centres at Rawalpindi in the north and Karachi in the south. In Jerusalem, *Flora Palaestina* edited by M. Zohary and N. Feinbrun was well under way. In the mid-1960s the first volume of *Flora of Iraq* made its appearance. This was a combined Baghdad/Kew project funded by the Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture. In Edinburgh, Peter Davis and his small team were deep into the organisation and logistics of the *Flora of Turkey* project. Although Peter Davis was a lecturer in botany at Edinburgh University, the Flora base was at the Royal Botanic Garden. From the earliest days of this project there was always very close co-operation between the University team and staff at the Botanic Garden. By the late 1960s, volumes 1 and 2 had been published; there was a long way to go with this and most of the other Floras mentioned. The 1960s were certainly a golden era for Flora writing and production.

In 1970, the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh was to reach a milestone in its history: 300 years since its

foundation. During discussions about how the event should be celebrated, a number of us at the Garden and the Flora of Turkey team started thinking that one facet of the celebration could be to bring together botanists working on south-west Asiatic plants and invite them to participate in a broad-based symposium. Thus was born the first Plant Life of South-west Asia symposium held in June 1970. A list of some of the invited speakers is like a cameo of taxonomic and botanical history: Hans Runemark, Per Wendelbo, Peter Davis, Peter Raven, Arne Strid, Clara Heyn, Friedrich Ehrendorfer, Sven Snogerup, Michael Zohary and his son Daniel, Desmond Meikle, B.L. Burtt, Hermann Meusel, the redoubtable Erna Bennett, Helmut Freitag and Siegmund-W. Breckle. The latter two gave lectures on their work in the 1960s on the botany of Afghanistan, at a time when it was possible to collect freely throughout that fascinating country. It was also a time when the richness and special interest of its flora was becoming increasingly apparent. Professors Kayacık and Faik Yaltırık gave a lecture on the forests of Turkey and the problems in conserving them. Also present at that 1970 meeting was Hasan Peşmen, whose tragic early death in 1980 was a major loss for Turkish botany. The published proceedings of that Edinburgh symposium (still available) make, even today, interesting and informative reading, both for the lectures and the discussions. It is good to see that five of the 1970 speakers are here today in Van.

In retrospect, I believe the 1970 symposium was very important in establishing and strengthening botanical and social links amongst botanists working in this vast and diverse area that we call south-west Asia. It also set a standard for subsequent meetings with the same title.

Quickly leaping 32 years ahead, what has happened in the intervening years and what does the future hold? One

very clear fact soon emerges. Throughout south-west Asia, there are today very many more experienced botanists than in the 1960s. Considering Turkey as an example, there were only three local contributors, Professors Demiriz, Kayacık and Yaltırık, to the first two volumes of *Flora of Turkey*. In contrast, there were 30 contributions from Turkish botanists in the Turkish-edited volume 11 published in 2000. Iran, too, despite its relative botanical isolation, now has a core of good active taxonomists; some of them are currently involved in the *Flora of Iran*, written in Farsi. Since the first fascicle of 1988, almost 40 family fascicles have been published to date. Further east, the *Flora of Pakistan*, mainly with Pakistani authors, is coming into its final stages; the first fascicles date from 1971 and by 2002 the total had reached 204.

The days when west European botanists and herbaria had an almost complete monopoly of Flora writing in south-west Asia are surely past. Today it is up to local south-west Asiatic botanists, especially the younger generation, to build on the past framework of knowledge and resources provided by European centres. The long-established botanical institutes like Kew, the Natural History Museum of London, Edinburgh, Geneva and the Natural History Museum in Vienna have hugely greater herbarium and library resources than anything that exist in south-west Asia. Local south-west Asiatic botanists

must continue to have close links with, and regular visits to, the European treasure-troves; this is vital for the future well-being of descriptive botany in the area.

Botanists can generally be classified as quiet apolitical modest people who enjoy their work and like forming friendly communities amongst themselves. Surely, they are much better at getting on well together than, for example, politicians. But although the future is relatively bright in a botanical context, there needs to be a greater coming together of local botanists from the different countries in south-west Asia. A number of countries have, sadly, few or no representatives at this Van meeting. Although there are, no doubt, a variety of reasons for this, a greater interest in, and a commitment towards, stronger collaboration is a desideratum.

Before this symposium ends, it is essential for the participants to decide on the time and place of the next one. In the past, these various symposia were arranged rather informally. Now, possibly, is the time for a change. We should also, either now or later, discuss the possibility of forming a somewhat more formal stronger organisation that binds together botanists in south-west Asia. A similar organisation to, for example, OPTIMA (Mediterranean countries), SABONET (southern Africa), PROSEA (plant resources of south-east Asia), and AETFAT (tropical Africa). Maybe Turkish botanists, the most numerous and active in the area, should give a lead.