

Australian Network for Plant Conservation (ANPC) Conference 2012 Canberra 29 to 31 October

A paper written and delivered by David Coutts, President of the Friends of the ANBG

NGOs – Research and Botanic gardens

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I am pleased to have the opportunity to talk at this conference. The theme of *Plant Conservation in Australia – Achievements and future directions* focuses on important issues that are not always fully appreciated by Governments or the wider community.

I come to this topic as President of the Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG) and with a long standing personal interest in native plants. The Friends is a significant group with about 1800 members. We operate totally on a voluntary basis, which is quite a challenge at times. Our role is to support the ANBG and I want to address the subject from that perspective.

Our aims, as set out in our Constitution, include:

- Support the Gardens
 - In the protection and enhancement of the natural environment through the conservation of a significant collection of the Australian native flora
 - In research into and display of the diversity of plant life, its ecological and geographic distribution and its horticultural values
 - In providing information and education to the community about growing, studying and promoting Australian plants through lectures, workshops and guided tours
- Raise money for the Gardens

Drawing on our experience over a number of years as an NGO, we can:

- Help identify the priorities for native plant research and how ANBG can contribute to that
- Provide in kind input to agreed research projects
- Provide funding to agreed research projects
- Help educate the community on the importance of native plants and why it is vital for them to be studied
- Science is not always adequately appreciated in the wider community
- Help bring together the researchers and the community to support key projects and disseminate the results

At ANBG the Friends have been moving to increase our support for research in a number of ways:

- **We provide volunteers to help with various programs and projects**
 - In recent times this includes support in the seedbank, an Australian Research Council (ARC) project on alpine seeds, collection of seeds in the ACT region and collection of data for an Acacia project
 - To be effective the volunteers must be properly trained in what is needed. If not then the work they do and the data they collect may be of limited use
 - We have started to gain some expertise in this area, especially and this has coalesced into an ongoing group of ‘seedy volunteers’

- The key component of this in kind support is commitment by the researchers to use the volunteers effectively and have the time and patience to quality control the activities.
- **We provide funding for research projects and can help leverage additional funding**
 - Fund raising is a key component of what the Friends of ANBG do
 - The new Management Plan for the gardens sets out many excellent and important priorities and actions but the necessary resources to deliver those priorities are going to be very hard to find. NGOs such as the Friends of ANBG can play a key part in harnessing such resources and fine tuning the priorities
 - Involvement of NGOs can be used to leverage funding from other sources in joint funded projects. That includes Governments, research funding bodies such as ARC and the private sector
 - The alpine seed project at ANBG is a good example of what can be achieved. This was awarded a grant from the ARC and involves ANBG, ANU, the University of Queensland and the Friends of ANBG. The Friends have contributed \$66000 to this project over 3 years plus significant in kind support. The involvement of the Friends as a community group was vital in achieving the funding for this project.
 - Funding from the Dahl Trust for a new Eucalypt walk was provided through the Friends and additional funding by the Friends is being made available
- **Replacement of resources**
 - There is a fine line between what NGOs should do and what should be done by Government funded resources
 - This is true at ANBG, where the Friends and Management have agreed the relative roles in a MOU, with the functions associated with actual management of the Gardens being outside the Friends direct responsibility. This MOU is reviewed regularly.
- **Advocacy**
 - An NGO group like the Friends of ANBG has a really important role as an advocate for the institution.
- **We are moving towards establishing a more structured Plant Research Group**
 - Growing out of our ad hoc involvement in projects in recent years, including support of the Botanical Resource Centre.
 - At the moment the idea is that this would be a group of Friends wishing to enhance their knowledge of Australian plants and improve their skills in plant identification and provide a forum for a discussion of wider aspects related to native plants and research.

There is also what I call citizen science projects, where the public and/or volunteers might collect data with fairly light, if any, direct supervision. One example is the Climate Watch Trail, a project of Earthwatch, which the Friends have supported at ANBG. This encourages visitors to record data for certain plants and lodge that data. It seems to me that where this could be really useful is long time series data, which is going to be most important in relation to climate change but it will need some commitment to ongoing supervision.

Concluding points

- Research on native flora is absolutely vital and probably always will be under pressure for adequate resources
- A range of issues make this research ever more important, including climate change, environmental degradation in Australia and potential uses of native plants for food, medicines, energy etc

- Much of the necessary research is long term, especially in relation to climate change
- NGOs can provide significant help to scientists in relation to this research through
 - Provision of funding, both directly and through leveraging wider funds in jointly funded projects
 - Support of research projects through in kind support; this can be the time and skill of volunteers and the provision of equipment and other facilities
- NGOs can play a really important part in raising awareness in the community of the importance of native flora and research
 - Through support of various tools and materials to inform the community, such as websites, printed material and events
 - As a public advocate for the institution
 - Scientists also need to see the value of NGOs and their volunteers
 - Researchers need to structure the project to effectively use volunteer resources and allow for necessary training and supervision
- NGOs can be a mechanism for bringing a range of views and expertise to the setting of priorities for research
 - ANBG needs an Advisory Council

I look forward to a very productive future relationship between research on native plants and the Friends of ANBG. The Friends are dedicated to seeing the collection is maintained at a high standard and used in the best possible way to address the challenges facing the Australian environment.

The website of the Australian Network for Plant Conservation is at <http://www.anbg.gov.au/anpc/>