

THE ROLE OF THE BOTANIC GARDEN OF PADUA AND THE *HERBARIUM PATAVINUM* IN TAXONOMY EDUCATION

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The University of Padua holds an important cultural heritage, left by the *Praefecti* of the botanical garden, which is the oldest botanical garden in the world. Important botanists such as G. Marsili, G. A. Bonato, R. de Visiani and P. A. Saccardo and their scholars promoted botanical research and teaching in Padua and in Europe and increased living and dried plant collections. Today the spatial and temporal information stored in the *Herbarium* and in the Garden can contribute to the working list of known plant species (Lughadha, 2004), towards a complete world flora. In accordance to the aims of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the creation of on-line inventories is the first step to put the collections to work for conservation. Digitization projects are carrying on in the *Herbarium*. They are the key to make better use of existing information and to ensure that new information is gathered by the most productive possible means. A team of students of the Faculty of Science is involved in the development of a simple offline database solution based on free software. It represents the beginning of an high quality digitization of the information collected in the *Herbarium Patavinum*. At the same time the garden is confronted with an unprecedented challenge: the University of Padua acquired 1,5 hectares of land just South of the garden to fit with significant new activities concerning taxonomy education. The involvement of students in the Botanical Garden and *Herbarium* activities can improve their skill in plant identification and often make them enthusiastic about what is generally considered an old-fashioned activity: to identify plants.

The educational function of botanical gardens and herbaria in plant identification is extremely important because all the tasks for the conservation of Biodiversity in the world require the support of taxonomy experts. Taxonomy is the tool by which the components of biological diversity are identified, named and enumerated and plays a key role in supporting virtually all the work of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

After almost 20 years from the statement of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the lack of expert taxonomists seriously hinders its implementation. The role of botanical gardens as well as herbaria is therefore of the utmost importance to reduce the knowledge gaps in our taxonomic system and to reduce the shortage of trained taxonomists.

Lughadha E. N., 2004. Towards a working list of all known plant species. Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond. B 359: 681–687.

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