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# ***Launch of the BGCI Plant Charter Group in London***

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On 29 April, 1992 BGCI launched a new initiative, the BGCI Plant Charter Group to increase the involvement of industry worldwide in plant conservation and as part of an appeal in support of the work of BGCI.

The launch was held at the Royal Society of Arts in London and was well attended by members of the British Media, representatives from commercial companies and conservation organizations in Britain as well as the BGCI Trustees and staff.

Prior to the launch several major companies joined the Group as either gold subscribers (£5,000 annual subscription) or silver subscribers (£1,000 annual subscription). Substantial donations have been received from several other companies.

## **The founding members of the Plant Charter Group are as follows:**

### **Gold Members**

Barclays Bank plc., U.K.  
Blackstone Franks, U.K.  
Cameron Hall Developments, U.K.  
Mitsubishi Corporation  
RTZ  
Shell International Petroleum Co. Ltd.  
Yves Rocher, U.K.

### **Silver Members**

Booz, Allen & Hamilton, U.K.  
Cargill Europe, U.K.  
Cumberland Ellis Peirs, Solicitors, U.K.  
Greig Middleton, U.K.  
Lasmco, p.l.c., U.K.  
Limagrain, France  
United Biscuits (UK) Ltd.

### **Corporate Donations**

Bibby and Co., U.K.  
British Airways, U.K.  
Cameron Hall Developments, U.K.  
Clovis Matton, Belgium  
Pioneer Hi-bred, U.S.A.

BGCI is very grateful to all of these companies for their support and participation in the Group which is set to become a major and significant forum for linking plant conservation initiatives with the commercial sector.

We reproduce below the text of the speeches given at the launch of the BGCI Plant Charter Group on the 29 April 1992 and the message which was sent to the launch by BGCI's Patron, HRH The Prince of Wales.

*Message from HRH The Prince of Wales on the occasion of the launch of the  
BGCI Plant Charter Group.*

The launch of the Plant Charter Group is an important step in reminding us of the critical role played by plants in our daily lives. All too often our attention is drawn to the very real threats to charismatic animals such as the African elephant and the white rhino. But we forget that without plants to nurture them and provide them with a habitat, they, like all other animal life, including ourselves, would not even exist. As the late Indira Ghandi wrote, human beings can only thrive in a green and living world.

Many of today's environmental problems have plant loss as their root cause, such as the tragic flooding in Bangladesh, the Philippines and Thailand, which has been aggravated by deforestation of the upper slopes or the soil erosion in the Sahel caused by overgrazing of the plant cover.

It is important that our dependence on plants is fully recognized by the business world, many sectors of which use plants directly or indirectly in their products or activities. It is not just crop plants and forestry trees that must concern us but the tens of thousands of wild plants which are daily being eroded by unsustainable exploitation. Such plants often provide environmental stability and make an essential contribution to the hidden economy of native people in many parts of the world.

I do congratulate Botanic Gardens Conservation International for highlighting these issues and in providing business and industry with a forum where they can be discussed in partnership. By bringing to bear their renowned skills and efficiency, leading companies can, I am sure, devise innovative approaches to combating the world-wide loss of plant diversity which leads to the impoverishment and degradation of our planet. I hope that as many companies as possible will join in this vital and imaginative initiative.

*Speech by Sir John Quinton, Chairman, Board of Trustees, Botanic Gardens Conservation  
International at the Plant Charter Group Launch.*

My Lord, Ladies and Gentlemen. Today's launch of the Plant Charter Group by Botanic Gardens Conservation International is very timely. It comes on the eve of the meeting of the UN Commission on Environment and Development – the so-called Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro where world leaders will be addressing the issues of environmental degradation, deforestation, soil erosion, pollution, climate change and sustainable development. It will also consider what international agreements are needed to slow the overexploitation of our natural resources by the ever-growing human population. However, the prospects for agreement on several of the key issues to be discussed there, such as climate change and the conservation of biological diversity, are, alas, none too promising and it is all the more important, therefore, that all of us, from whatever area of society we come, make a conscious effort to become good earth citizens no matter what the outcome at Rio.

The environment is an area where political science, economics, business, international law, ethics and environmental science all intersect. And if we are to seek environmental conservation and build a sustainable society with equity, then the decisions that have to be made will necessarily involve the business, commercial, financial and industrial sectors and their willing participation and involvement in the negotiation and implementation of international agreements on the environment. Already many firms have realized that caring for the environment is not just a matter of good public relations but often makes good business sense. Of course those industries that are largely based on natural resources, such as foodstuffs, commodity crops, timber, fibres, pharmaceuticals, horticulture and so on, or which depend on a green and healthy environment such as many sports and much of the leisure industry, have a special interest in (and indeed responsibility for) ensuring the worldwide conservation of our heritage of plant diversity.

The Plant Charter Group acknowledges the primary role that plant life plays in our environment and in our daily lives. It will provide business community with the chance to become directly involved with BGCI and its members in tackling some of these urgent issues of conservation and development, both at a national and international scale. Several leading companies have already enrolled as Founder Member of the Charter Group and our aim is to expand the group to about 100 members and to develop it as an influential forum for debating, planning and implementing conservation action for the world's most valuable natural resource – plants. Most valuable and perhaps least recognised as such.

*Speech by Professor Vernon H Heywood, Chief Adviser to the Board and Director of BGCI  
at the launch of the Plant Charter Group.*

My Lord, Ladies and Gentlemen. When Botanic Gardens Conservation International was first established in 1987 it was the intention of its parent body, IUCN – The World Conservation Union, that the botanic gardens of the world would develop into a major new global force for conservation. The first task was to provide a structure and a mechanism for botanic gardens across the world to work together and also to prepare a strategy document to set out how the various conservation goals could be achieved.

Over five years later, the BGCI network now consists of more than 350 gardens and associated institutions in 70 countries, the Botanic Gardens Conservation Strategy is in place and has been widely adopted, and the demands on the services of BGCI are increasing all the time, especially for policy and institutional development.

Largely due to the activities of BGCI and its member gardens, greater attention is being paid by governments to the specific needs of plant conservation. It is still true, however, that in most considerations of the environment the plant element tends to be overshadowed by other problems such as pollution, the greenhouse gases, whaling, deforestation and the plight of the charismatic mammals and birds of our planet. Yet throughout the world our natural ecosystems are being replaced by low diversity agricultural systems or by roads, buildings, industrial complexes or other kinds of development. In the process we are losing much of the natural plant diversity on which we depend for breeding our future crops, for supplying traditional medicines (and occasionally developing new western pharmaceuticals), and for providing local communities in the tropics of the thousands of native fruits, vegetables, fibres, oils, herbs and spices that are an essential part of their daily lives.

Botanic gardens are now recognized as playing a crucial role in securing the continued existence of these traditional varieties, local species and wild relatives of cultivated plants. The conservation of germplasm of wild species has been largely neglected until now and the BGCI member gardens form a ready made network of resource centres where this vital work can be based.

In October this year we are holding the 3rd International Botanic Gardens Conservation Congress, in Rio de Janeiro, under the patronage of the President of Brazil. This will be the first major conference to be held after the Earth Summit in June (also to be held in Rio) and will provide an important opportunity to assess the outcome of the Conference as far as the conservation of plant life is concerned.

Conservation must, however, involve all aspects of society, including and perhaps most importantly, the industrial, commercial and business sectors. BGCI decided that it was critically important to establish a partnership with the business sector to take forward this important work – hence the launch of the Plant Charter Group.

The aim of the Charter Group is to focus attention on the primary importance of plant life and the need for a coherent strategy for its conservation and sustainable use. Our **10 point Worldwide Action Plan** outlines the principal elements of such a strategy and we are seeking the cooperation of industrial and commercial sponsors, many of whom use plants directly or indirectly as the basis of their operations.

Equally important, we will provide a forum for dialogue with business, industry and commerce to discuss environmental concerns. Plant conservation on the ambitious scale upon which we are embarked needs their entrepreneurial and organizational skills. We can learn a great deal from them and will seek to apply some of their experience to our conservation operations. We hope that we in turn can provide some insight into the ways in which the professional conservation world views these matters and attempt to clear away some of the misunderstandings and confusions that seem to surround the issues involved.

The economic development of this country and its trading partners has depended very largely on the exploitation of plant resources, usually without any consideration of the consequences for the continued existence of natural habitats and plant life. Agriculture, forestry, plantation crops, commodity crops, the food industry and much of the leisure industry depends on the continued availability of a healthy natural environment of which plants form the indispensable core.

We are encouraged by the initial response to our initiative by major companies, over a dozen of which have already become Charter Group Members and recognize the vital role of plants as our key resource. Following today's launch we look forward with confidence to developing this new partnership and expanding it worldwide.

*Speech by Lord Howe, Parliamentary Secretary (Lords), Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, U.K. at the launch of the Plant Charter Group.*

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me particular pleasure to join you today for the launch of the Plant Charter Group Corporate Appeal. The Ministry has recently said farewell to someone known to many of you, my friend and colleague Baroness Trumpington to whom your invitation was originally extended. Having taken on her Ministerial responsibility for Research and Development, the privilege of being your guest falls to me.

I, quite apart from my own good fortune in being here, believe you have chosen your moment well. The conservation of biodiversity has in recent months taken on a high international profile. At home, in Europe, and on the world stage, the issue is high on the agenda. With increasing concern from many quarters over environmental degradation and genetic erosion, conserving biological diversity has quite rightly become a major international objective.

Of course, the environmental and ethical reasons for seeking to conserve biological diversity are compelling. But there are also important economic considerations, particularly in relation to the exploitation of useful genes for agricultural and industrial purposes. We must ensure that required characters will be available for future development – so that, for instance, we can respond to future challenges and changes in climate, in prevalent pests and diseases, and to changes in methods of production and market requirements.

Botanic gardens, gene banks, and other *ex situ* collections play an immensely important role in ensuring that genetic resources – and especially the many varieties within a species – are available not only as a basis for research, but also as material for the development of new crop varieties, as well as a means for future restoration of a variety *in situ*.

I think it is appropriate for me to leave it to others to speak in detail about this Appeal – which of course I heartily welcome – and the excellent work of Botanic Gardens Conservation International in raising the profile and achievements of botanic gardens in conservation work worldwide. I would, however, like to say a little about the backdrop of recent developments in the field of conserving biodiversity. First of all, developments in the UK; secondly, in the European Community; and thirdly, in the international context.

Developments at home first. On arriving in my new appointment, I was pleased to learn that the Department has just completed an in-depth Review of the government's involvement in the *ex situ* conservation of plant genetic resources. This was carried out in response to pressure from the scientific community for a more coherent Government policy in this area. And we have delivered just that.

The Review process – and its conclusions and recommendations – have, I believe, been widely welcomed. Incidentally, copies of the Report of the Review are freely available on request. I'll just run through some of the Report's more important conclusions. It recommends, amongst other things, that a coherent UK strategy document should now be prepared; a small interdepartmental group should be set up to review funding priorities; a booklet should be issued to publicise the existence and details of current UK collections; that the UK Plant genetic Resources Group should develop its contacts with other organisations, notably the BGCI; that long-term funding commitments should be considered for certain collections; and that the UK should continue to participate fully in international efforts to establish comprehensive networks of *ex situ* collections.

Over the coming months, I shall be looking to ensure that, as we go about implementing these various recommendations, we do all we can to achieve improvements – improvements in the coverage achieved by UK collections, in the co-ordination between them, in value for money obtained, and in the way we utilise our collections.

In that context I am pleased that MAFF – as sponsor department for the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew – contributes substantial funds to its wider conservation activities. MAFF also provides full or partial support for the Vegetable Gene Bank at Wellesbourne, the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale, the Pea Gene Bank at Norwich and the wild species seed bank at Wakehurst Place, at the RBG Kew.

In short, the Government's involvement in plant genetic resources – including botanic gardens – is in no doubt. We are firmly committed. Our recent Review is evidence of this and will help to improve and coordinate present arrangements. And the Review also provides a better basis for the UK to adopt a clear and coherent national policy stance, in the context of international development which are very often fast-moving.

So, turning to Europe. The European Parliament has recently voted a substantial new budget line for *ex situ*

measures to set up a European programme for the conservation and utilisation of plant genetic resources: some 2 Mecu in 1992 (about £1.4m) rising to 8 Mecu in 1995 (about £5.6m). The European Commission is currently formulating a programme to spend this money and we hope its proposals will reach the Council of Ministers shortly. We will, of course, be looking both to assist in shaping the programme and to participate fully in its operation. It is envisaged that this should involve jointly-funded initiatives which extend to activities such as characterisation of genetic material and training for those maintaining and using it.

Finally, the international front. International cooperation is obviously crucial to the conservation of biodiversity. It is, by its very nature, an international endeavour.

International developments – and there are many – are obviously now dominated by UNCED and the forthcoming Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. A Convention on Biodiversity is expected to be signed. This is clearly evidence – if evidence were needed – of very real international concern. The issue is centre stage.

The latest draft of the Biodiversity Convention rightly recognises *ex situ* conservation – including the work of botanic gardens – as an important and complementary approach to *in situ* efforts aimed at habitat conservation. The Summit is likely to conclude – and I hope that it does – that an internationally agreed programme is required in this area.

Clearly the UNCED negotiations cover a host of issues, but it is perhaps worth highlighting that the draft Biodiversity Convention also addresses – and is likely to regulate – the sensitive issue of access to genetic resources. Here the principle of a country's sovereignty over its natural resources meets head on with the principle of free and unrestricted access to genetic resources.

On that note I am pleased to hear that in the UNCED discussions, Kew's approach to the collection of genetic resources has been commended. I would hope it can be seen as something of a role model for institutes worldwide in terms of good practice in the acquisition of samples: that's to say – obtaining explicit permission at the outset, providing duplicate samples to the donor country and so forth.

There are difficult negotiations ahead in the UNCED process and we still do not know the outcome. However, it is now clear that conservation of biodiversity is firmly on the international agenda. I am pleased the UK is playing an important part. The Prime Minister was one of the first heads of government to commit himself to going to Rio. Our experience and expertise in this field is widely recognised by other countries.

Having outlined some of the recent developments at home and overseas, I would like now to end by congratulating BGCI on its impressive initiatives – particularly its 10 Point Worldwide Action Plan and the establishment of the Plant Charter Group. With the support it clearly deserves, the Group's Corporate Appeal should help greatly to mobilise and realise the undoubted potential of botanic gardens worldwide in the effort to conserve our natural heritage of plant resources.

Mr Chairman, I congratulate you on your Appeal and on your ambitious conservation programme whose aims, I am sure, we all warmly endorse. I wish you every possible success.