

BOOK REVIEWS

1997 IUCN Red List of Threatened Plants. Edited by Kerry S. Walter and Harriet J. Gillett, compiled by the World Conservation Monitoring Centre. Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK: IUCN – The World Conservation Union. 1998. lxiv + 862pp. ISBN 2 8317 0328 X. £30 (softback).

At just over 2.5kg the *1997 IUCN Red List of Threatened Plants* is in the literal sense a 'heavyweight' publication; however, on opening the book I rapidly realized that it is much more than the ultimate doorstop. What it provides is the first comprehensive listing of threatened plants on a global scale. A massive task and one of great importance as ever increasing human impacts upon the environment are pushing many species to the brink of extinction. The figures for plants are shocking, with around 12.5% of the world's flora (34,000 species) facing extinction.

The Red Data Book idea was conceived by Sir Peter Scott in 1963 and since then many such books have been produced all over the world for different plant and animal groups. The present *Red List* lacks the detailed information for each species that is to be found in most Red Data Books, and instead gives a summary view. Each record consists of: 1, a scientific name followed by the authority; 2, a conservation status based upon the pre-1994 IUCN threat categories; and 3, the distribution of the taxon. Where relevant, CITES listing is also provided, and in all cases the source of the information is given. This apparently rather minimal approach is perfectly understandable when the scale of the task is considered. Even the inclusion of potentially very useful data such as synonyms and vernacular names would create a publication running to many volumes and render it largely impractical. What is made abundantly clear by the editors is the fact that the large amounts of data concerned are far more effectively managed in electronic format.

The Red List is, therefore, something of a compromise between making valuable information widely accessible in a non-electronic format, and limiting the available data to the most useful because of the limitations and costs of paper systems. As the length of the list makes the extraction of statistics difficult, a number of tables in the introductory section provide useful summary information. For example, the total number of threatened plants are listed by country and by family, providing valuable context to individual cases. The Red List represents a snapshot view of part of the information held on the Threatened Plant Database at the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC). This database is being constantly updated and will hopefully be used periodically to produce new editions of the Red List. In many ways the publication is a first stab at producing such a list and the huge differences in data quality from different parts of the world are the most obvious problem. This is openly acknowledged by the editors who hope that the publication will act as a stimulus and result in the filling of some gaps.

I have only admiration for those who have taken on such a monumental task, and done such a good job, but there is one addition that would further improve the

book. Clearly the volume has as one of its fundamental aims an increase in the awareness of threatened plants so that conservation agencies, involved primarily with *in situ* conservation, can focus resources on key species within their geographical areas of responsibility; therefore, the easy compilation of geographically based priority lists is of central importance. As the Red List is structured according to a taxonomic framework and has no index of species occurring in particular geographical areas, the only way to compile an area based list is to go through it page by page. This is not easily done as the list extends to 752 pages of small type.

This aside, the Red List is a work of central importance to all those concerned with threatened plant conservation. Whether you are working at the local, national or international level, this book will help in the setting of priorities in plant conservation, a necessary process because resources for conservation will always be limited. This book is also of relevance to those concerned with managing botanical collections. By increasing the ease with which managers can identify accessions of threatened taxa, increased cooperation between *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation efforts should result. Another important role is to draw attention to the scale of the problem faced by plant conservationists, thereby strengthening the case for increased resources in the future.

Problems have to be quantified before they can be effectively dealt with. Conservationists concerned with threatened plants now have a global information baseline, a significant development which can only improve the prospects of the many plant species currently facing extinction. The Red List is essential reading for the plant conservation community, but even if you are not directly involved with this I recommend that you take the time to search out this remarkable publication in a suitable library.

M. COLEMAN

A Fragile Eden: portraits of the endemic flowering plants of the granitic Seychelles.

R. Wise. Princeton, Massachusetts: Princeton University Press. 1998. 216pp., incl. 78 full-colour plates. ISBN 0 691 04817 7. £49.50 (hardback).

'The most impressive and memorable feature of the Seychelles flora has to be the palms, for the occurrence of six monospecific genera on landmasses covering less than 300km² in the Indian Ocean immediately brings to mind the processes of isolation and evolution that are so evident on tropical oceanic islands.' So writes Malcolm Coe in his introductory essay entitled *The biogeography of the Seychelles Islands*, which adds value to Rosemary Wise's exceptional work. And the most memorable of these palms is the coco de mer (*Lodoica maldivica*) which is confined to the Vallée de Mai on Praslin. Rosemary Wise is one of our outstanding botanical artists, and her painting of the coco de mer is a characteristic contribution to the iconography of the callipygian coconut. The coco de mer is no stranger to artists. In 1883 Marianne North left England expressly to paint it. On reaching Praslin she