

Speech at the presentation ceremony of the Biodiversity Conservation Awards

Elinor Breman, Millennium Seed Bank

It is an honour to be here this evening to collect this award on behalf of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, for our global conservation programme – the Millennium Seed Bank Partnership.

Earth is the only planet in the universe we know for certain supports life. Yet life on Earth is in crisis. We are living through the climate emergency and an age of extinction. Our actions over the next decade will be critical if we are to reverse environmental devastation.

Since 2000 Kew has been working with almost 100 countries and territories, and more than 260 partners, to collect and conserve the seeds of wild plants – saving them from extinction and making this genetic resource available for use.

By drying and freezing seeds we can store them for 10s to 100s of years, providing possibilities not just for our times, but for generations to come.

To date, we have protected over 46,000 species through this partnership – a remarkable achievement that is recognised through this award.

Although we would like to, we cannot collect and protect seeds from every plant in the world, we have to prioritise. Across the partnership we focus on threatened, useful and culturally important

plants.

Seeds are stored in the country of origin, with part of the collection sent to the Millennium Seed Bank for safety duplication. We have an active programme of research working on these collections – both to monitor their viability in storage and to understand their germination requirements, so that we know how to turn a seed back into a plant. The collections also allow us to increase our knowledge of seed biology, ecology and traits that could be useful in providing nature-based solutions to the challenges facing humanity.

Let me bring the work of the Millennium Seed Bank to life for you through some of our projects:

The Adapting Agriculture to Climate Change project was a 10-year collaboration with the Global Crop Trust to collect, protect and use the wild relatives of 29 of our important cultivated crops – such as potato, rice, banana. We worked with partners in 22 countries, including Spain, making almost 4000 collections of crop wild relatives. Over 3000 of these have now been distributed to agricultural research centres to identify traits such as drought and heat tolerance that will be useful to breed climate resilient cultivars.

Our Global Tree Seed Bank Project, now in its third phase, has been conserving rare and threatened trees from around the world. To date, more than 3000 woody plants have been added to seed banks, greatly increasing our knowledge of these species, and providing opportunities to include native and threatened trees in the large-scale tree planting efforts currently taking place. We must ensure that the right tree is planted in the right place – and

monitored until it has grown.

In Spain we have partnered with 8 different seed banks to conserve the native flora, and around 4,000 species have been protected by our Spanish partners, including 100s which are included in the IUCN Red List of endangered plants – like *Allium pyrenaicum*, a wild garlic endemic to the Pyrenees.

The foundation of the Millennium Seed Bank Partnership is training and capacity building, to ensure that our partners have the expertise and facilities to manage the conservation of their native flora. It is particularly gratifying that the award panel recognised the importance, value and excellence of this work.

With 2 in 5 plants currently threatened with extinction seed banking has never had greater relevance or importance. I would like to recognise the work of all my colleagues, past and present, at Kew and across the Millennium Seed Bank Partnership for our achievements to date – and I look forward to continuing our vital work.