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SPECIAL ISSUE

GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE: THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

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INTERVIEW WITH APGA'S NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR DR. CASEY SCLAR

CARE FOR THE RARE

The logo at left is designed to aid visual identification of signs and threatened species in garden collections.

Engage visitors with the conservation and climate change stories of plants in your collection

ABBY HIRD, ANDREA KRAMER, AND RAY MIMS

Climate change is threatening the world's plant diversity at an unprecedented rate[1], yet plants are all too often left out of climate change discussion, policy, and action. Many have argued that this is largely a result of "plant blindness," the inability to see or notice plants in one's own environment, and an inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs[2].

BGCI estimates that public gardens collectively maintain one third of the world's plant diversity and conserve (*ex situ*) more than one fifth of globally threatened species[3]. Gardens are well equipped to help cure plant blindness by telling the stories of the threatened (or near threatened) plants in their collections. This will help visitors literally see the trees for the forest, while increasing the understanding of why plants are so important and yet threatened by many factors, including climate change. It will also help individuals understand what they can do to help. If more people understand and appreciate plants and the need for plant conservation, they are also more likely to appreciate and support the mission and work of public gardens.

As simple as this sounds, the plant conservation community has yet to really figure out how to do this effectively, especially given limited resources and competing interests. So how can we make the most of what we have and work strategically to increase our ability to reach our visitors with more meaningful and memorable messages? The Care for the Rare project is a useful step that develops clear messages and conservation stories that gardens everywhere can use to highlight threatened plants in their collections. It also directly supports the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation's Target No. 14 ("the importance of plant diversity and the need for its conservation incorporated into communication, education and public awareness programmes").

Filling the interpretation gap

After the North American Collections Assessment identified more than 39 percent of North America's 9,496 threatened plants in public garden collections[4], BGCI US and the United States Botanic Garden realized that there was an opportunity to better educate the public about plant conservation. We proceeded to survey gardens across North America to understand current efforts to interpret conservation messages through public garden collections. As a result of the overwhelmingly positive response (110 gardens providing valuable input), we found that 86 percent of respondents do some interpretation of threatened plants in their collections, but would like to do more. We also received examples of what individual gardens are doing to tell conservation stories. Remarkably, more than half of all respondents expressed interest in assisting with the development of or in using template materials, so we moved ahead with the project.

How the project was developed

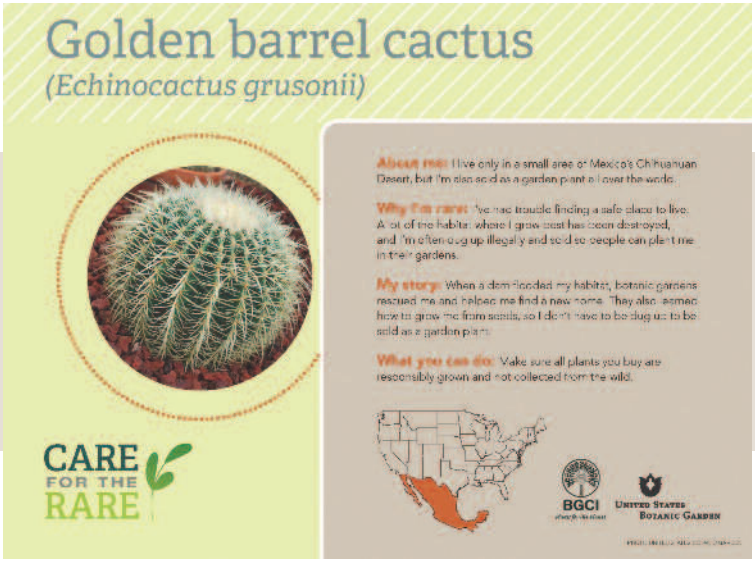
A first priority was coming up with a catchy slogan or memorable name for the project. A number of interesting suggestions were offered, and ultimately Care for the Rare was agreed upon. (Care for the Rare is a hybrid of several existing communication efforts within the public garden community, including phrases used by the University of Guelph Arboretum and the University of Washington Botanic Gardens.) Second, we produced mocked-up sign designs and enlisted a group of twelve volunteers involved in public garden interpretation and/or conservation to provide in-depth critiques, text suggestions, parameters, and format ideas. Finally, based on the feedback, we had signs professionally designed in a variety of file formats, so any interested garden of any size can use them.

These templates can be used as-is or customized. Each garden can easily add their logo and interesting facts about their collections to the templates using Microsoft Word. If more design control is desired, the templates are also available as Adobe InDesign and Photoshop files. Each garden can decide how to print and display the signs, but it can be as simple as printing an 8 x 11 (species sign) or 11x17 (panel) sheet and laminating or placing it in a plastic sleeve.

The following materials are now available:

- Care for the Rare logo: can be used to visually identify conservation messages and/or threatened species in your

Species signs such as the one below can be used as is or customized by any garden who wants to use it.



The larger panels are designed to allow gardens to address the importance of plants and plant conservation to visitors.

collection, including species affected by climate change. As more gardens use this, the collective power of garden conservation efforts will become apparent.

- Panel templates: can be used to share universal messages with visitors about the importance of plants and the role of public gardens in conservation.
- Species sign templates: can be used as is, or you can choose other species threatened by human activities, climate change, etc. Just insert the text, map, image, and your logo, and decide how to print and display.
- Species selection and template guidelines: provide tips on selecting species to highlight and on using the templates to make things as easy as possible.

Next steps

These templates were used to create conservation stories for five species in the United States Botanic Garden's collections, and were put on display during Endangered Species Day/Plant Conservation Day on May 18, 2012. We have received great feedback, and the templates are now being evaluated by a number of other gardens, but we would like more input and additional participants to make these resources as useful and effective as possible. We plan to test the templates at gardens through 2013 and collect additional feedback regarding their design, usability, and effectiveness in reaching visitors.

In addition, we will be increasing the number of species signs available for use. We will be creating additional signs for species threatened by climate change, and hope to work with gardens to develop many more. Please consider participating. If staffing capacity is an issue, this could be a perfect winter volunteer or intern project. As gardens develop signs, we plan to collect them whenever possible and build a library of species signs that any garden can use. We're working with the APGA's Plant Conservation professional section to develop a vetting process for newly-developed signs before making them freely available online.

These collective efforts should allow the public garden community to quickly develop a library of threatened species stories that can benefit visitors at your garden and around the world.

Get your garden involved—it's easy!

First, visit www.bgci.org/usa/CareForTheRare to check out what we have developed so far: digital versions of the five signs and two panels, as well as downloadable templates. Then, if needed, use BGCI's PlantSearch database[5] to identify the best species in your collections to interpret. Please contact BGCI US (abby_hird@harvard.edu) if your garden has questions about trialing the signs and/or creating additional signs.

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4 Kramer, Andrea, Abby Hird, K. Shaw, Michael Doman, and Ray Mims. 2011. *Conserving America's threatened plants.* BGCI US. **www.bgci.org/usa/NACA2012report**

5 BGCI. 2012. *How to add your collections to PlantSearch.* **www.bgci.org/resources/plantsearch uploadinstruction.**