

Dear Victoria and all Plantlife staff

As I conclude my nine year term as a Trustee and stand down as Chairman, I wanted to thank you all for your work and to share with you where we have got to as an organisation in recent years and my hopes for the future.

I have always considered that Plantlife punches well above its weight. But we had a hiatus following the departure of our first Director with a loss of our domestic focus, no clear forward strategy and significant shortfalls in funding. This has all been turned round, so that we are not only back on track but are in a far better position than we have been since I first became a Trustee. There are a number of key reasons for my optimism.

We developed a clear new vision and business strategy through a collaborative process involving all staff and all trustees (a breakthrough compared with the exclusive processes used previously). The resultant Strategic Business Plan 2007-2011 has provided the framework for turning the organisation round. It has been implemented effectively by the executive team and performance monitored by the Board. No organisations can survive, never mind progress, without such a strategy.

We hired a first class Chief Executive. The change in title was itself significant as it singled a move from old style to a modern organisation. We failed to find someone of the right calibre first time round; some of my colleagues were in favour of some half way solution, but no organisation can operate effectively without an executive boss. So we were fortunate that Victoria was not only available but came with strong credentials from those who had worked with her. And the rest, as they say, is history.

We had to take the brave decision to reduce costs by making some posts redundant. This is never a comfortable position for Trustees, but Victoria was right in advising us that this was essential for our survival as an organisation. We must never forget that charities and conservation bodies must be financially viable or they will fold.

We had to look at the top executive structure in terms of people capability and costs. Significant changes have been made in people and structures, and operating practices under Victoria's leadership and with the full support of the Trustees. What we have now with Geoff, Liz, Mark and Nicola (any more?) is an effective top team playing to individual strengths and delivering the business in a highly corporate manner.

We took the decision to move our resources into cash and away from the financial markets. This has proved to be even wiser than it seemed at the time in the light of the financial crash and the volatility of the financial markets. Along side this, we changed our financial advisers and we now employ a company with a high reputation and good track record in working with charities. As a result we are gradually, with due diligence, moving our money back into the market on a measured basis and according to strict business and ethical criteria.

We determined that we needed greater professional input on fund raising and public engagement. We have achieved this by a combination of hiring expert staff and

galvanising the conservation staff into playing their part in developing fund raising bids. Our success rate has been very high compared with the performance of other organisations. With the impact of the credit crunch cascading through statutory and charitable funding organisations, we have to ensure that we maintain our focus and our professionalism in this activity.

Related to the previous point, we had a major task to rekindle the support of our chief benefactor: The Hon. Vincent Weir. The fact that he has personally committed to providing significant resources over the forthcoming years is testimony to the strength of our position and especially to the fact we have a sound business plan for our work. I cannot over estimate the value of the income from the endowment funds and the opportunities this will increasingly give us to invest our own resources at our own discretion in plant conservation. This is the gold that any organisation desires and we are fortunate to be in this position. The next step is to recruit other donors to help us in the same way.

We have been concerned for some time that our message about the importance of plants in the wild and their effective conservation was not getting over to the wider public. Hence, we embarked on the exercise I grandly called Strategic Profile Development. You are all familiar with the reasons for this and the longer term purpose: namely to make conservation of plants in the wild more accessible to society at large and to increase our ability to undertake more work at our discretion to achieve this. We have made very good progress on this with key outcomes already achieved. The Ghost Orchid Declaration was a milestone document in repositioning Plantlife in the policy advocacy milieu. And, the fact that we presented it to the UK Parliament and the two devolved administrations was evidence of our intent to be more penetrating in our advocacy work. It is the result of joint Trustee and staff working backed up with the deep knowledge base of conservation staff and, with the help of our branding agents, new ways of making our messages more accessible. The re-branding exercise has not only given us a new image, a publication style that is refreshing, evocative and accessible, it has given us a new tool to penetrate new audiences. This is essential if we are to grow in size, in stature and in income. When the Board reviewed progress a few days ago, as part of its annual strategic review, it agreed that we had made good progress, but we still had a long way to go to achieve our ambition.

The review of our reserves policy and of the reserves themselves was an essential undertaking as the position had not been reviewed for many years. The Trustees did not know the purpose our reserves performed and that so many were leased out. We took, what for Plantlife, was a relatively radical step of undertaking this work through a joint Trustee/staff group. This was not viewed comfortably by some trustees, but my experience elsewhere shows that this is a very effective method of operation in critical policy tasks. We have not the resources yet to roll out all of the decisions from the review; particularly the focus on a few reserves by raising their profile, and by engaging with partners in accrediting land stewarded to the highest standards for plant conservation. I hope that these will be achieved and I shall regard it as a retrogressive step if these are set aside. The HLF grant for Ranscombe is a major step forward and I

hope that this will place the reserve in the top league of plant conservation and public outreach.

We have pioneered a new method for recognising areas of great significance for plants and the means for improving recognition and stewardship. Our Important Plant Areas is an exemplar of creativity and practicality at a time when new designations are not the flavour of the political agenda in Europe. Our methodology is outstanding and our processes of engagement with operating partners and with stakeholders have been exemplary. It was widely welcomed as an essential part of the IUCN WCPA Programme of Work for Europe.

The leadership and influence we have had in stimulating the development first of the European Strategy for Plant Conservation and then the Global Plant Conservation Strategy has been enormous. It proves that small organisations with high calibre staff focussed on delivering a product can achieve great success. The implementation and review processes at both levels, as well as in the UK and its constituent parts, have demonstrated our ability to galvanise others into action and support, and to deliver effectively in practice.

Do I have disappointments? Inevitably yes. I would like us to have greater unrestricted money to do the things we want to do rather than largely those that others would like us to do. I always wanted us to move forward faster than was culturally or humanly possible. I hoped that we would be able to finance the continuation of our international work, and especially our outstanding work on medicinal plants. I hoped that we would have implemented the results of the reserves review more speedily. I am very disappointed that the wonderful County Flowers initiative was shelved and despite our best efforts has not yet been revived; please make sure it is revived. I hoped that our membership would have risen considerably as a reflection of our greater influence, the greater knowledge about plants conservation and why it is vital to society and, therefore, give us much needed resources for undertaking more work. I would like us to have greater outreach throughout Britain, but recognise that this is costly and will have to rely on specific grants and increasing the role of volunteers.

I am constantly reminded, as I wander around the country and the European continent, and meet former colleagues in the statutory agencies and colleagues in the great IUCN network, and many others, that Plantlife is a vital, respected and necessary part of the conservation world, that we deliver what we say we are going to, and that we really do punch well above our weight. Thank you all collectively and individually for your efforts, your professionalism, and your commitment. It has been challenging, and intellectually and practically rewarding, working with you all over the last nine years. I shall continue to look at the organisation progressing as one of your supporters. I will continue to be a policy agitator on conservation and land management, especially demanding fundamental reform of that outmoded and highly skewed instrument the Common Agriculture Policy. I shall become more active in the role of plants and their growing media in mitigation of climate change through carbon sequestration and through advocacy on joined solutions

for the environment. And, of course, I shall continue to enjoy myself photographing wild flowers in their natural locations and covering the walls of our homes with the prints.

Many thanks to you all and all success for the future of Plantlife.

Roger

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