

REGIONAL FLORAS: THE TARGET GROUPS, USAGE AND FEEDBACK

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TARGET GROUPS AND USAGE

The target groups for regional floras may be generalized for the purpose of this discussion, into four main groups.

Firstly, in the Flora Malesiana region – a major producer of tropical hardwoods and other commercial forest products – one large target is the forest industry, consisting of foresters, business entrepreneurs, and forest scientists. The more technical-minded of this group use floras for determination of scientific names, and for access to published information on ecology, distribution, uses, and properties of individual species. Where suitable floras are not available, those involved in the forest industry are obliged to work with local ethnobotanical knowledge, which predates Linnean taxonomy. However, the absence of a modern usable flora for a region contributes to *laissez-faire* forest management. In forest inventory work, for example, unknown species are put into a miscellaneous category to which no further attention is paid. It is difficult to keep track of and manage what is unknown or undefined.

The second group is concerned with genetic resources, biodiversity, and their conservation and management. For this group, floras are the most important sources of information on specific and infraspecific diversity, distribution, endemism, ecology, and frequency. This group has come into prominence only in the past few years, but is likely to become the most influential group, because of diminishing natural resources, and fears for the ecological health of the earth.

The third target group consists of plant hobbyists with special interests in ornamental, exotic, or rare plants. The orchids, rhododendrons, palms, Nepenthes, gesneriads, water plants, ferns, begonias, etc., are objects of intense interest to hobbyists, and such hobbyists are the most avid users of taxonomic monographs outside of a herbarium. This group is growing in numbers and expertise with the result that recent books on orchids, Nepenthes, ferns, and rhododendrons, have been produced by hobbyists rather than by professional taxonomists. However, the authors of such books rely on standard floras and on professional help for the accuracy of their identifications and nomenclature. Their own contributions are in the form of good photographs, personal knowledge of the living plants, and popular descriptive writing.

The fourth target group is what might be called the invisible college of taxonomists, consisting of taxonomists past, present and future. As we labour over our floras, we are influenced by the accomplishments and mistakes of past taxonomists, concerned over the approval or disapproval of our present peers, and worried over what future

taxonomists may think of our work. No other field of scientific endeavour carries such a psychological load. As a result, most floras tend to be written by taxonomists for taxonomists. Even in the case of the Tree Flora of Malaya, which was specifically targeted for the forest industry, it has proven very difficult to reduce the taxonomic jargon, and sometimes even to persuade authors that it is possible and respectable to write vegetative keys.

FEEDBACK

The fact that floras have had a currency of 50–100 years has created attitudes among flora writers which are quite unique. One of these attitudes is the low regard for consumer feedback. In contrast, books in other scientific disciplines, and even dictionaries and encyclopedias, are now planned for a currency of 5–10 years only.

The question asked everywhere is why floras cannot be produced faster. Does the work really require the long time spans being taken, and does more time result in better work? The British sociologist Parkinson discovered the law that “work expands to fill the time available for its completion”, but that such work is mostly vacuous, and the time is actually not properly used. When a long time span is allocated to a project, there is the danger of being caught in what may be called Parkinson’s trap, i.e. being trapped in vacuous work which we are unable to recognize as such, and therefore cannot escape from. A long production time span also exposes the practitioners to the danger of losing touch with consumers, and with political, economic, and ecological realities.

The concept of getting feedback in order to enable one to make corrective adjustments, is important in any enterprise that hopes to stay relevant and competitive. Business enterprises are increasingly finding it necessary to approach feedback in a professional way, for instance by hiring consultants to make surveys, analyse results, diagnose problems, and to identify bad work habits as well as circularity in management thinking. The feedback concept is resisted wherever the practitioners believe that they themselves, individually, are the best judges of standards, not the consumers, and not even other practitioners. Certainly, it is the right of any self-employed individual to maintain individual working standards. However, in taxonomy, the self-employed independent practitioner has long ceased to exist. What we have are practitioners dependent on public funding, and who are therefore vulnerable to external forces. The necessity to read and engage these forces is something that cannot be ignored for long.

In dealing with feedback, one common error is to ignore unpleasant trends, and to hope for things to improve on their own accord. This passive approach seldom works elsewhere and we have no reason to believe it will work here.

Among the more obvious areas of concern that the managers of taxonomic enterprises should look into are: funding for floristic work, sales of published floras, and rate of new recruitments to taxonomy. Are the trends rising or falling and do we know why? Are there differences between countries and institutions, and if so, are there lessons that we can review and use to keep our enterprise healthy?