

International Conference *Utowana*

CIENFUEGOS BOTANIC GARDEN, CUBA

LOTUSLAND'S STATUS AS A WORLD CLASS GARDEN IS WELL KNOWN.

Less apparent are our international collaborations and prominence in the scientific community. We have maintained a strong international presence during our 25 years as a public garden by attending conferences ranging from cycad biology to plant conservation. The knowledge gained and the professional relationships fostered make these experiences invaluable.

Last November I had the opportunity to represent Lotusland at the International Conference *Utowana* at the Cienfuegos Botanic Garden in Cuba. The theme, "building botanical bridges," is more relevant than ever as botanical networks become increasingly interconnected and function as collaborative units that work

across borders. In fact, botanic gardens hold more than 30% of known plant species in their living collections and 40% of those are known to be threatened.

The Cienfuegos Botanic Garden is the oldest in Cuba, having been established 116 years ago originally as a collaboration with Harvard University. As the garden was evolving in the early 1900s, a scientific expedition arrived in Cuba on a ship called the *Utowana* carrying the renowned North American plant explorer David Fairchild. Many of the important plant collections at Cienfuegos can be attributed to his explorations. Fairchild and the *Utowana* "established a bridge for exchange" and the conference was named in honor of these contributions.

The conference covered many topics from plant collections management and history of plant collecting in the Caribbean and Central America, to Cuban floristic studies and horticultural practices in public spaces. I was honored to open the conference with a presentation on the "Importance of Botanic Gardens and Their Living Collections." I emphasized Lotusland's collections management techniques, the mission of botanic gardens to raise conservation awareness and the value of sharing plant material between institutions to help assure the continued survival of threatened species.

Two months prior to the conference Cuba was raked by Hurricane Irma, leaving a devastating swath of destruction. I had planned a trip to visit *Hemithrinax ekmaniana*, an endemic Cuban palm with a distribution restricted to three *mogotes*, or limestone hills, but unfortunately it was directly impacted by Hurricane Irma and the area became practically impossible to access. This palm is believed to have



TOP: Paul Mills and Julio Pavel of Sancti Spiritus Botanic Garden meeting for the first time after more than a year of discussion about the critically endangered Cuban endemic tree, *Erythrina elenae*. Lotusland has one plant of this species in the nursery. BOTTOM: The unique petticoat palm (*Copernicia macroglossa*) is endemic to western and central Cuba. Lotusland has two small plants in the Palmetum.

survived the storm. Fortunately, it is also found in the collections of eight botanic gardens, including Cienfuegos, but six of these gardens were also damaged by Irma. It is crucial for us to protect these threatened species, but in this case the gardens themselves proved vulnerable. From a practical point of view, the more widely the plant is distributed the better for long term survival.

At the end of the conference we vowed to continue the construction of the bridges we had begun. — Paul Mills



Immense royal palms (*Roystonea regia*), the national tree of Cuba, line the entrance to Cienfuegos Botanic Garden.