



Lankesteriana International Journal on
Orchidology

ISSN: 1409-3871

lankesteriana@ucr.ac.cr

Universidad de Costa Rica
Costa Rica

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Lankesteriana International Journal on Orchidology, vol. 7, núm. 1-2, marzo, 2007, pp.
161-163
Universidad de Costa Rica
Cartago, Costa Rica

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ESTABLISHING AN ORCHID CONSERVATION ALLIANCE

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Introduction

Almost every orchid society and orchid grower realizes that orchids in the wild are in danger of disappearing. The simple growth of the human population dictates that spaces that once were subject only to the vagaries of nature are now impacted by the human need for space to live and grow food. As orchid lovers, what can we do ?

The San Diego County Orchid Society

About 15 years ago some of the members of the San Diego County Orchid Society (SDCOS) decided that we should support orchid conservation in some concrete way. At that time the Nature Conservancy as well as the Massachusetts Audubon Society in the United States were assisting with establishment of a conservation area in Belize known as the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area. The purchase of the land had incurred a significant debt by the Nature Conservancy and we decided to assist with retiring that debt and thereby ensuring the establishment of the conservation area. We decided to sell our excess plants to raise the money and asked the SDCOS to grant us a free sales booth at its spring orchid show and sale. To our pleased surprise we raised approximately US\$4600 at our first sale in 1991. We repeated this activity for two more years, raising a total of about US\$14,000 that was donated to the program for Belize. Subsequently we continued our fund raising efforts but we decided to support some other organizations. In 1996 we realized that our knowledge of projects worthy of support was limited and we decided to advertise for proposals. Since then we have supported between 3 and 8 projects per year. We have now expanded our sales to twice yearly and earn about \$10,000 per year. Donations of quality plants for sale have been very generous. In most cases these

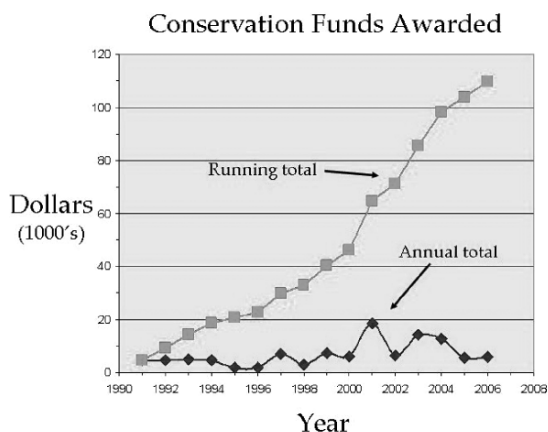


FIGURE 1. Annual and running total of funds donated for conservation projects by the SDCOS.

are simply extra plants grown by members of the SDCOS. We do receive some donations from local professional growers, from nurseries going out of business, and also occasionally from the estates of deceased members. Quite a few members of the society help with the work of repotting, caring for donated plants before the sales, and staffing the sales booth twice yearly. The annual and running total of funds donated for conservation projects by the SDCOS are shown in figure 1. A listing of projects supported can be found at the SDCOS web site www.sdorchids.com. The SDCOS continues to solicit applications for funding.

Potential applicants are encouraged to look at the list of projects already funded to see what sorts of projects the SDCOS does support and to contact Ron Kaufmann, Chairman of the SDCOS Conservation Committee at kaufmann@sandiego.com for more information.

The Orchid Conservation Alliance

Two of the authors (PST and RK) have been associated with the San Diego County Orchid

Society for many years. As we participated in the SDCOS conservation program we realized that if orchid growers in San Diego were so generous in their support of conservation that probably there were other growers outside San Diego who would be generous also. The question was how to reach them? We considered reproducing the sales of donated orchids in other areas but the logistics of doing that from San Diego seemed insurmountable, given that we both had, and needed, jobs to support us and our orchid collections. Of course, we hope that orchid societies in other locales will be able to duplicate the success of the SDCOS program, but we could not do that ourselves. Thus we conceived the idea of establishing a new membership organization of orchid lovers devoted to orchid conservation. There are societies devoted to conservation of orangutans, whales, birds, plants, etcetera, and nature in general, but none that seemed to have a special focus on orchid conservation. Given that the circulation of the American Orchid Society's journal "Orchids" is above 22,000, it seemed that there was a significant pool of potential members. And so we decided on a name, the Orchid Conservation Alliance or OCA, gathered some directors and a scientific advisory board, defined an initial project, applied for incorporation in the state of California, and applied for tax exempt status from the US government. We decided that our primary purpose was the preservation of orchids in their native habitats. We realize that there are many aspects to orchid conservation, but it seemed to us that the root of the problem was the loss of habitat. Furthermore, preserving habitat preserves orchids not yet identified. Clearly, preserving habitat is not simple and defining which pieces of habitat to preserve with the means available can be difficult, but, frankly, there is no time to lose.

We have defined three criteria that must be met for a parcel of land to be targeted for preservation. These criteria refer to biodiversity, local involvement, and legal status. An appropriate orchid biodiversity must be present. We do not deny the conservation value of deserts and glaciers, but we are an orchid conservation organization. There must be demonstrable local involve-

ment for protection of a parcel of land. Most of the orchid habitat we are likely to consider for protection is in the tropics and we are in North America. We are unlikely to be able to oversee the management of an area in a foreign country. Thus we seek local organizations to take ownership of any parcel of land we might support for preservation. And finally, there must be some legal mechanism for long term protection of the land. With these thoughts in mind the first project we undertook was to set aside land in Ecuador. Ecuador is well known for its astonishing orchid biodiversity. Ecuador has laid the legal basis for protecting against development because it has the means to establish conservation easements. And we were aware of the activities of Lou Jost in Baños. Lou and his associates have established the Ecominga Foundation for the express purpose of protecting local habitat. Thus we set as our first goal the raising of \$10,000 to enable purchase of 100 hectares of land near Baños, Ecuador, by the Ecominga Foundation.

As noted above, we had decided that the Orchid Conservation Alliance should be a membership organization. We hope that we will be able to do a good enough job such that OCA members will be willing to donate money for more than one project. We started soliciting members by speaking at individual societies. Although this was successful in generating a small and enthusiastic initial membership, it was clear that we needed a more efficient means of contacting people. Enter Harold Koopowitz. As most people will know Harold Koopowitz is certainly committed to orchid conservation and he is also the Editor-in-Chief of the Orchid Digest. Through Harold and his associates at the Orchid Digest, especially Cynthia Hill and Steve Gollis on the publication committee, we were able to undertake a very successful membership campaign via the pages of the Orchid Digest. We now have over 120 individual members, more than 8 member societies, more than \$13,000 in the bank, and successful completion of our first fund raising campaign. Most recently we earned an endorsement from the American Orchid Society.

As this article is being written we are considering where to focus our energies for a second project. There seem to be many opportunities. At present we are focusing on possible projects in Ecuador and Brasil. And we are planning our next fund raising campaign. There is certainly no lack of orchid biodi-

versity left to be protected. Individuals from any country interested in joining the OCA are urged to visit our web site at www.orchidconservationalliance.org or to contact Peter Tobias by email at peter@orchidconservationalliance.org.

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