

Hannah Wilson, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

XIX International Botanical Congress in Shenzhen, China, 21 July – 5 August.

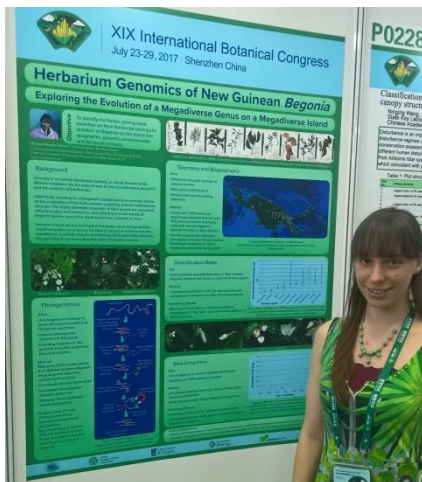
Thanks to the generous support of the Royal Society of Biology, I was able to attend the 19th International Botanical Congress (IBC) in Shenzhen, China, this July.

Held every 6 years, the IBC is the largest regular gathering of plant scientists, and this year was no different with a record 7000 delegates in attendance.

This year's conference theme; "the importance of plants" perfectly encapsulated the excitement and energy of the delegates, and their passion for studying the botanical world, whilst also highlighting our fragile dependency upon a mere handful of crop species, and the alarming rates at which biodiversity is being destroyed.

As part of the opening talks on Sunday afternoon, Peter Raven introduced the "Shenzhen Declaration on Plant Sciences"; a manifesto challenging international governments to take plant sciences seriously. The declaration gives seven priorities to allow society, with the help of science, to mitigate impacts of human activities on plant species, habitats, and distributions, and to approach the formation of a sustainable world for ourselves and those who follow us.

Overwhelmed by the size and scale of the conference, and empowered by the speeches of the afternoon, I set about carefully planning my week, whittling down the 1,447 scheduled talks to a somewhat more manageable timetable totalling 74 talks that, with some quick dashes between halls, it ought to be physically possible to see!



Presenting my poster on New Guinean *Begonia* at the IBC.

Going to an international conference at such an early stage of my PhD, I was anxious about not yet having any results to present, however I found the experience extremely beneficial. I presented a concept poster outlining my project, "Herbarium genomics of New Guinean *Begonia*; exploring the evolution of a megadiverse genus on a megadiverse island". My poster described the current knowledge gaps and shared my aims and proposed methods. This gave me the fantastic opportunity to discuss my project with numerous researchers boasting expertise in a broad range of relevant fields at a point when my plans were still fluid and easily altered.

Not being due to present my poster until Tuesday (and Thursday) lunchtime, I was pleasantly surprised to be independently sought out by three researchers at the welcome reception on Sunday evening wishing to discuss my project in more detail having already viewed my poster either on the conference app, or in the poster display area adjacent to the reception. Additionally, the lunchtime poster sessions enabled

me to meet many more researchers interested in my future results, and intriguing questions resulted in some interesting discussion and numerous suggestions which I found very valuable. Attending both the *Begonia* and the New Guinea symposia gave me the opportunity to meet new researchers in my fields, extending my network, developing new and productive relationships, and maintaining existing ones; facilitating greater collaborative opportunities and establishing an exciting new link with a forestry project in Madang province leading to mutually beneficial material sharing.

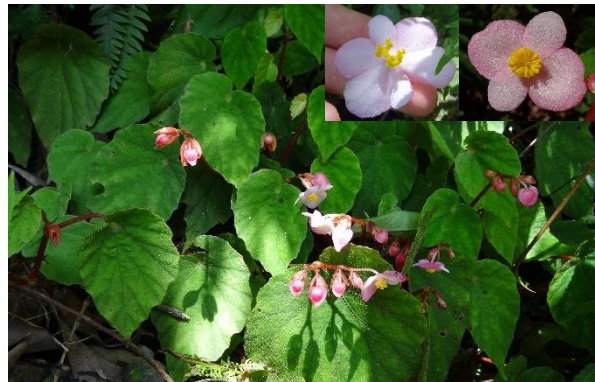
On Wednesday morning, a *Begonia* meeting held at Fairy Lake Botanical Garden provided an opportunity for the world's experts on the genus to meet and discuss conservation strategies and the establishment of an international *Begonia* working-group to facilitate more efficient communication among those interested in the scientific study of *Begonia*, and encouraging increased collaboration on future projects.



Begonia meeting at Fairy Lake Botanical Garden

Receiving the Royal Society of Biology Travel Grant gave me the opportunity to attend IBC and thus present a PhD concept poster. This resulted in interesting and highly useful discussion on both the merits and pitfalls of my proposed approach with scientists I would not otherwise have met. It also enabled me to spend time with Kuo-Fang Chung and Yu-Hsin Tseng from Academia Sinica, Taiwan as being in Shenzhen made travel to Taiwan affordable. Immediately after IBC, my research group visited Kuo-Fang's lab to work with Yu-Hsin, the first person to use the custom

bait set designed for *Begonia* by Kuo-Fang and Catherine Kidner (RBGE) which I intend to use in my own project. As Yu-Hsin's work relates directly to my own research, this was an extremely useful, and fruitful visit for me, in which I could discuss in detail the optimal methods and work pipe-line. It also gave us the exciting opportunity to see *Begonias* in the wild.



A Taiwanese endemic; *Begonia pinglinensis* in its natural habitat.