TRAVELLING FOR CONSERVATION

IT ISN'T OFTEN YOU GET THE OPPORTUNITY TO TRAVEL TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD TO SEE SOME OF THE BEST PLANT CONSERVATION FACILITIES IN THE WORLD. HOWEVER, THE CONTINUAL CHALLENGES OF PLANTBANK OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS HAD LEFT FEW OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE USE OF THE GENEROUS FRIENDS' STAFF SCHOLARSHIP AWARDED TO JOHN SIEMON IN 2008. HERE HE TELLS US ABOUT THE TWO TRIPS HE TOOK IN 2010.

Earlier last year while we waited in anticipation for NSW Treasury funding I took the opportunity to head off on two separate study tours to the US (June) and the UK (August). As fate would have it, my flight departed 30 minutes after the NSW State Budget was released on the Treasury website. While standing in the boarding line, four of my family and colleagues fired through the news that we had secured $15.537 million in funding for PlantBank. With a sigh of relief, I boarded my plane bound for Austin, Texas.

By now you should be familiar with the basic concepts of PlantBank – a signature project of the Royal Botanic Gardens & Domain Trust's Botanic Bicentenary incorporating plants through science, conservation and education in one facility. With that in mind I sought to visit places that could provide examples of best practice in the areas of science and facility design, facility management, architecture, science interpretation, seed banking, public engagement and education programs and environmentally sustainable design measures. There is just too much to present from my travels but here are some of my highlights.

The laboratory at RHS Wisley (Woking).

FINDING INSPIRATION

My first stop to the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Centre (Austin, Texas) presented a surprisingly similar experience to the Australian Botanic Garden, Mount Annan. The 113ha garden has a narrow focus to display and interpret the 650 species of native Texan flora. It is strongly focused on the visitor experience with excellent interpretive signage, an impressive and changing art collection, an extensive community education program and the relationships between plants and the surrounding ecosystem explored in detail. Their facility includes a seed bank, extensive native prairie, a field research station and a beautiful visitor centre that doubles as an interpretive facility while remaining adaptable as an event hire space. The garden has a remarkable 400 volunteers to support its activities.

A particular highlight of my trips included a visit to The Daniel F and Ada L Rice Plant Conservation Science Centre at the Chicago Botanic Garden (CBG). The $51 million facility was completed in September 2009 and is very similar in many respects to the PlantBank concept. It has been designed to allow the public to see scientists at work in their laboratories, and you can learn about each laboratory through interpretive panels, interactive displays and hands-on exhibits.

Green technology is now commonplace in many buildings I visited, with the CBG Plant Conservation Science Center, the American Institute for Landscape Architects and the California Academy of Sciences demonstrating the approach to roof spaces being more than just wasted space. Green roofs are becoming signature design elements that are not just visually stunning but also provide thermal benefits, minimising water runoff and providing habitats for a myriad of organisms. In Chicago's case, it was an extension of the laboratory where a research program was underway. Products incorporating recycled jeans as wall insulation, pre-chilling air handling systems with dam water, and solar and wind capture devices were other elements now considered standard design considerations in construction methodology. Incorporating these elements into PlantBank, funds permitting, will result in one of the greenest NSW Government buildings that is a model for sustainable design and utilisation.

Photos: John Siemon

In the US, I visited more than 25 science or horticulture related facilities in nine cities, with an exhausting 14 flights in 16 days. The UK leg was more relaxing. I had 21 days to travel between Edinburgh, London and Cornwall and could spend an entire week at the Millennium Seed Bank (MSB). Presentations and meetings with key staff and a series of basement-to-rooftop tours provided rare opportunities to explore the inner workings of this world-class facility. Detailed discussions on the design of the MSB highlighted the strengths and weaknesses to be incorporated or avoided when developing detailed designs for PlantBank.

VALUABLE EXPERIENCE

A standout of my trip was Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry. How many times have you been to a museum and pushed a button on a display only to find it was broken? This isn't one of those places. It even has a three-storey tornado you can interact with. The museums I saw demonstrated latest scientific thinking and were able to explain complex ideas simply and effectively. Other highlights included The Getty Museum in Los Angeles, a stunning blend of art, architecture and horticulture.

A must-visit is the Eden Project in Cornwall, UK, with the largest conservatories in the world (according to Guinness World Records). There are over a million plants from around the world assembled in an amazing landscape, including separate rainforest and Mediterranean biomes that are built into the side of a quarry.

The trip was an incredible opportunity and I intend to put all the information to good use for the best outcome for PlantBank and the Trust. In December we appointed BVN Architecture to develop detailed designs for PlantBank. I'd like to thank Friends for its continued support of the staff scholarship scheme.

John Siemon, Project Manager, PlantBank

{Above} Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Centre (LBJWC) {Right from top} The Getty Museum; Visitors can view the research areas of CBG; Ant sculpture at LBJWC; *Banksia serrata* sculpture (RBG, Kew), Green roof at CBG; star anise sculpture (RBG, Kew); the biomes at the Eden Project. {Opposite, from left} Rowing a coracle! Interactive plant art at the US Botanic Garden, Washington DC.