

Conservation Workshop on Ascension Island

From the 31st January 2013 to the 6th February 2013 the conservation team on Ascension Island hosted a plant conservation workshop; Developing Ex-situ Conservation Collections. This was led by Marcella Corcoran, UK Overseas Territories Officer from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Also attending the workshop was Cynthia Williams from the Falkland Islands and staff and volunteers from the conservation team on Ascension.

As part of the conservation team on St Helena I was invited to attend the workshop. The workshop was run over 5 days, with a programme of both theory and practical activities.



Workshop team, left to right. Darren Fox (Seabird restoration RSPB), Vanessa Thomas (Nurseries Officer St Helena), Cameron Stewart (Darwin BAP Project trainer), Dr Nicola Weber (Darwin BAP Project), Dr Sam Weber (Darwin BAP Project), Marcella Corcoran (UK Overseas Territories Officer), Liza White (OTEP project), Jolene Sim (Asst conservation Officer), Nathan Fowler (Seabird restoration RSPB), Kenickie Andrews (JNCC Marattia Project/ AIG Path Clearance), Catherine Supple (OTEP project), Cynthia Williams (Falkland Island), Charlie Dooley (JNCC Marattia Project/ AIG Path Clearance), Natasha Williams (Conservation Asst), Tyler Benjamin (AIG Youth Trainee).

The activities covered:

An explanation of the overseas territories ex-situ collections at RBG Kew; research on Ascension's priority species; a group review of Ascension's existing nursery facilities, and threats to plants in the wild and in the nursery.

Training was given in collecting DNA samples from plant material for genetic sampling. This was done in the field alongside a seed collection of the species being sampled; data was recorded for all samples. Training was also given in seed collecting, seed cleaning, drying, storage and record keeping.



Collecting *Aristida adscensionis*

Training for collecting Herbarium specimens was given and the group took specimens of *Aristida adscensionis*, *Cyperus appendiculatus* and *Ophioglossum vulgatum* which were sent to Kew for final mounting.



Marcella demonstrating the preparation of a herbarium specimen

Marcella demonstrated Kew's online herbarium and how to access it. There were discussions on making compost using local material. A compost pit was identified, and the group prepared the first batch of local compost.

Protocols for setting up seed germination trial for cultivation, including seed treatment and sowing, watering and care of seed pots were explained.



Team setting up seed treatment

The team also carried out fern propagation from spores on compost and agar, and transplanting seedling from agar to compost.



In the workshop the team decided that they should do a display garden outside of Red Lion on Green Mountain. The team worked hard removing invasive species, constructing a wire fence to keep out animals, then collecting endemic and native plant for display.



Clearing invasives for display garden



Completed display garden

During the workshop I was able to support Marcella in the practical work sessions. I was pleased to be able to contribute ideas and techniques from our established systems for plant conservation on St Helena. The workshop was a valuable opportunity for me to learn more about Ascension Island's endemic species and the challenges we face in conserving them.

I helped Marcella to host an open day for the public, where presentations on Royal Botanic Garden Kew, composting, management and control of pests were given. Practical activities were held for growing vegetable seedlings and composting.

The RMS schedule meant that my stay on Ascension was extended beyond the workshop and for the remaining seven days I worked with the conservation team. I provided assistance where they needed help, shared experience and knowledge. With Conservation Officer Stedson Stroud, Conservation Assistant Natasha Williams, Catherine Supple OTEP project officer and Assistant Conservation Officer Jolene Sim I had several site visits to some of the restoration areas they maintain.

On a team day I also supported Charlie Dooley and Kenickie Andrews, to transport wooden posts to Elliot Pass, Green Mountain. The posts will be used for mounting interpretive information about the plants growing in the area to educate visitors to the national park. Charlie and Kenickie are working hard to conserve the *Marattia purpurascens* one of the Ascension's endemic ferns and maintaining the paths on Green Mountain.

The turtle egg laying season had started and staff at times get called out to rescue turtles stranded on rocks. I had the opportunity to help rescue a turtle and make sure that it got back to the sea. We also had the opportunity to go on a night time turtle tour, guided by Dr Nicola Weber and Dr Sam Weber.

Overall I enjoyed the experience of visiting Ascension and found it useful. I'd like to thank colleagues on Ascension Island, Marcella and Cynthia for their hospitality and support.

Vanessa Thomas

Nurseries Officer

St Helena.



