

New England Botanical Club – Minutes of the 1038th Meeting October 3rd, 2008

Bryan Hamlin, Recording Secretary

The 811th meeting of the New England Botanical Club, being the 1038th since its original organization, was held in the lecture hall of the Fairchild Biochemistry building at Harvard University on Friday, October 3rd, 2008, with 33 members and guests in attendance.

Club President, Karen Searcy, announced the resignations of Ray Angelo and Erika Sonder as Vascular Plant Herbarium Curator and Assistant Curator, respectively; then introduced the newly appointed Curator, Leslie Mehrhoff, and announced that the new Assistant Curator would be Walter Kittredge. Les called everyone's attention to the October 5 birthday of Merritt Lyndon Fernald and encouraged everyone to celebrate by collecting a plant specimen.

Barre Hellquist announced that next June's field trip would take place June 3-7, 2009, at the University of Michigan's Biological Station near Pellston in northern Michigan, and that the cost would be approximately \$66 per person per day. Elizabeth Kneiper made a plea for volunteers to help with the Friends of Farlow annual meeting on November 1st. Janet Sullivan talked about the Consortium of Northeastern Herbaria and announced the upcoming meeting and workshop to be held at the University of New Hampshire on June 8-9, 2009.

Kanchi Gandhi then introduced the speaker, Dr. Mark Skinner, National Botanist with the USDA, National Resources Conservation Service. Mark works at the National Plant Data Center in Louisiana as Data Manager for the PLANTS Database (<http://usda.plants.gov>). The title of his talk was "The USDA PLANTS Database: A digital flora for the future."

The PLANTS database is an information system designed for use by the general public, as well as by those working for federal agencies such as the National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management. It provides standardized information about the vascular plants, mosses, liverworts, hornworts, and lichens of the United States and its territories. Recently, data from Canada has been included because of that country's extensive common border with the US and the overlap of many plant species.

Dr Skinner gave an overview of the information available from PLANTS, highlighting the recent upgrades and additions for those who haven't accessed the site recently. Of special note were the processing of BONAP data and information from selected herbaria, as well as the inclusion of Pacific Basin floristic information, hepatic checklists, and Hawaiian nonvascular plants data. The database has profiles on 43,000 taxa. Information given for each taxon includes: nomenclature according to Flora of North America (FNA), synonyms, classification, duration and habit, images, a distribution map, native status, and legal or wetland indicator status. The sidebar menu provides a variety of additional options, for example, one can access an expanded list of characteristics, information about cultural significance, fact sheets and plants guides where conservation information is available, or users can generate a checklist or download posters. Over 40,000 images are available at the site, and high-quality copies can be downloaded.

Distribution maps for each species are based on specimen data and/or on the literature. This summer, a feature was added whereby a user can "mouse over" a state to view the source data for the map. This feature applies at the state level, although distribution is available at the level of county. Native or introduced status is viewed as part of the map feature.

Starting in January 2008, major upgrades have been implemented to the PLANTS website. Among the new features are: broader search category capabilities, updated distribution data, addition of Alaska county-level data, revised information on native status, improved nomenclature connections (for misspelling, for example), and standardized authors of binomials. Latin basionyms, have been checked for consistency, and other checks have been run on data for consistency and integrity. Information is now being updated by taxon rather than by geographic area, which has slowed progress somewhat.

Dr. Skinner's current focus has been to develop digital keys for the PLANTS website. At present, keys are available for US gymnosperms, US wetland monocots, and grasses for all US states. Eventually, this feature will be expanded to include the entire North American flora. The Ericaceae and Fabaceae will come on-line in 2009, and the Asteraceae, all US monocots, and the Lamiales will be available in 2010. Although links are included whereby users can contribute data and photos, Mark noted that this has not been very successful so far because of problems with formatting and validating the information received.

Future plans for the PLANTS website include: adding a pollination conservation module, updating legal and native status information, filling in gaps in species distributions, completing incorporation of the Pacific Basin floristic information, and expansion of the polyclave keys, as well as generally improving performance, incorporating routine taxonomic updates, and expanding the partnership with FNA. Dr. Skinner was especially enthusiastic about adding the information on pollinators, which would be layered over the plant data, and is designed to promote pollinator-friendly agriculture.

Dr. Skinner concluded his fascinating and informative talk by giving website hit figures, which showed the huge increase in use of the PLANTS database in the last few years. The site is now one of the most heavily used scientific websites.