

Press Release/News Item

International workshop on crop wild relatives hosted at Botany & Plant Science, NUI Galway, Ireland.

The Botany & Plant Science discipline at the National University of Ireland Galway (NUI Galway) hosted an International Workshop on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Crop Wild Relatives (17-18 October 2009). The workshop featured expert speakers involved in crop wild relatives conservation and sustainable use activities from Bolivia, Madagascar, Uzbekistan, Sri Lanka, Colombia and Ireland. Participants from the UNEP-GEF funded Global Crop Wild Relatives project were also taken on a study tour of plant conservation activities in the Burren region of Ireland. Sponsors and partners for the workshop were NUI Galway Botany & Plant Science, Genetic Heritage Ireland, Bioversity International and Irish Aid.

Crop wild relatives (CWR) are plant species that are related to the crops that sustain humanity's growing demands for food, feed, fuel, fibre and medicines. The gene pools (genetic resources) of these crop wild relative species contain genes and characteristics that will need to be harnessed for crop improvement in the decades ahead. The irony highlighted by the workshop is that many of these genetic resources which are essential to our future are themselves in danger of extinction or genetic erosion. The workshop focused on current efforts in Ireland and in developing countries for the conservation and sustainable use of crop wild relatives.

Professor Charles Spillane (Head of Botany & Plant Science at NUI Galway) indicated that crop wild relatives are of major importance to past and future efforts for crop improvement and food security. He highlighted that crop production worldwide will have to double its food output by 2050 in order to meet demand, while in parallel minimising the environmental footprint of agriculture. Advances in plant genetics which facilitate increased and more efficient use of genes from crop wild relatives will have a key role to play in meeting this incredible challenge. Professor Spillane stressed the key importance of strengthening links between conservation and use of crop wild relatives as both are mutually reinforcing activities, particularly in relation to meeting emerging food security needs in developing countries.

Dr Danny Hunter, Global Coordinator of the international Crop Wild Relative Project based at Bioversity International (Rome), stated that "while the importance of crop wild relatives is reasonably well understood what is not generally appreciated is just how threatened many crop wild relative species are and how poorly prepared the world is to deal with this situation. At present, only small numbers of crop wild relatives are actively conserved in the world's genebanks or in their natural habitat. While crop wild relatives could hold the key for the adaptation of many of our food crops to climate change, to make this a reality we need to urgently address the issue of crop wild relatives conservation otherwise we stand to lose many species to extinction. Failure to do so could have a catastrophic impact on future food security and the lives of many people. This is the acute and urgent dilemma we all face."

Websites

<http://www.cropwildrelatives.org/>

<http://www.nuigalway.ie/botany/>

<http://www.geneticheritageireland.ie/>

For further information contact via the above websites:

Prof Charles Spillane, Botany & Plant Science, NUI Galway, Ireland.

Dr. Danny Hunter, Bioversity International, Rome, Italy.



Global Crop Wild Relatives Project scientists on study tour of the Burren, Ireland. Left to right: Dr. Sativaldi Djataev (Uzbekistan); Dr. Beatriz Zapata Ferrufino (Bolivia); Dr. Anura Wijesekara (Sri Lanka); Jeannot Ramelison (Madagascar).