

Book review

Managing Plant Genetic Diversity

Edited by JMM Engels, V Ramanatha Rao, AHD Brown and MT Jackson
CABI Publishing, Oxford; 2002. 487 pp. £75.00, hardback
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This volume includes 42 papers, involving 113 authors, which were given at the International Conference on Science and Technology for Managing Plant Genetic Diversity in the 21st Century (SAT21), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2000. The proceedings report current knowledge, methodologies, and issues. Not surprisingly, attention is given to genomic analyses and bioinformatics as a means for better understanding gene pools and genetic manipulation, but the book achieves balance in addressing the every day realities of managing gene banks *ex situ* and *in situ*, the latter both in the wild and in agroecosystems. The special problems of underutilized plant resources, GIS applications, and the economic values and issues of diversity are considered. Some of the papers are of a general nature, providing useful summaries of a subject; others have a case study tenor. Throughout there is a participatory thread, arguing the need to bring farmers and researchers, public and private interests, and developed and underdeveloped nations together in collective enterprise to assure that the benefits of genetic diversity are shared equitably by humankind. All in all the volume provides an authoritative, substantive account of the management of plant genetic diversity from a largely 'westernized' agrodevelopment perspective.

The absence of organizational information about the book works against its effectiveness. While the table of contents places the papers in thematic clusters, there is

no further mention of themes. The editors provide no introduction to the themes or explain why two short homages, one to Jack Hawkes, the other to Sir Otto Frankel, are included. Each individual deserves accolades, but the reader is left to wonder, to what purpose? In other words, there is no road map to the book, except in the summary chapter, which actually might have served as an introduction. The papers do not include abstracts, which would give the general reader a better sense of content.

The summary paper by T Hodgkin and V Ramanatha Rao notes that the conference paid little direct attention to the social and cultural aspects of genetic diversity maintenance. This is a significant omission. From a diversity standpoint, a strong case can be made for *in situ* preservation of land races and other variants, but the plea fails to deal with the overwhelming market and social forces that draw rural communities away from subsistence farming, the very process that created the desirable crop diversity. To argue for stasis on the part of subsistence farmers conflicts with human aspirations for betterment.

While international conferences provide an opportunity to take stock of what has been accomplished, they also are an occasion to express a vision of the future. This volume accomplishes the first admirably, but it provides little vision. Where will the management and conservation of genetic diversity be in 100 years? Surely the authors represented in this volume could have provided stronger insights, for what they portend is crucial to the future of genetic diversity and humankind.

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