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Recent work on the Post Herbarium at the American University of Beirut

Abstract

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The collections made by George E. Post (and containing many of his type specimens) were augmented by Mrs W. S. Edgecombe with local Lebanese ones and together form the majority of the herbarium of the American University of Beirut. These have remained in the sequence of the second edition of Post's *Flora* in a locked room, somewhat unavailable. Recently, considerable attention has been given to this collection and work is in progress to make the collection of use to staff, students and visitors. The types are being located, scanned and placed in protective folders. Recent collections made by the ongoing U.K. Darwin Initiative for the Survival of Species are being added. The nomenclature used is gradually being brought up-to-date.

Introduction

The herbarium of the American University of Beirut, popularly known as AUB but whose acronym is BEI, houses the collections made by George E. Post in the 1850s on which he based his well-known *Flora of Syria, Palestine and Sinai*. It is often known as the Post Herbarium and contains a large number of his type specimens. However, the collections were augmented by Ms W. S. Edgecombe in the late 1960s with local Lebanese specimens. (In fact, many from around Beirut itself.) Together the specimens of these two collectors form the bulk of the herbarium, though some material would seem to have been obtained by exchange as there are significant numbers of French and American specimens present. Nine hundred and fifty-five genera are represented and the specimens are housed in 36 reasonable steel cabinets in the sequence of the second edition of Post's *Flora* as revised by Dinsmore (Post & Dinsmore 1932). To use the collection it was necessary to find the *page number* as there were no indexes. Genus folders had slips of paper, attached by paperclips, enumerating the species enclosed. (This indicates the lack of use made of the collection: most are still attached) The collection was kept in a locked room with a single key.

A useful project was started by a member of staff some years ago to scan the specimens with the intention of making a CD-ROM available of the specimen images, but without

any priority given to the unmarked and unidentified type specimens present or creating a suitable database.

Recently, a collaboration between AUB, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and The University of Reading has been underway on the award from the UK Darwin Initiative for the Survival of Species. The project is led by Dr Colin Clubbe of Kew and is entitled "The Darwin Project in Coastal Vegetation Survey and Management for Lebanon". Among the aims of the project are the provision of training in botanical inventory, plant identification and herbarium management. It includes the sponsorship of the training of students through project-based MSc degrees at the AUB. The coastal vegetation was defined as that on land up to 500m in altitude and not more than 5 km from the shoreline. Within the context of the project, an annotated checklist of species was compiled between November 1999 and April 2000, based on records extracted from Post & Dinsmore (1932) and Mousterde (1966-1983), *Nouvelle Flore du Liban et de la Syrie*. Nomenclature was updated using *Flora Europaea*, *MedChecklist*, *The Flora of Turkey* and reference to taxonomic specialists, especially Mr N. Hepper (formerly of Kew) and Mr R. W. Rutherford (Reading).

In addition, the project has provided training in field collection and herbarium work. This has allowed the collection of almost 2000 gatherings from typical habitats of the Lebanese coast in 2000-2001. Specimens are being deposited in BEI with duplicates in The University of Reading Herbarium (RNG). Identification of these specimens is now almost complete, with labels made by the Reading BRAHMS (Botanical Research And Herbarium Management System) database and sent to Beirut.

One of the immediate impacts of the project is the close communication and interaction between the investigators from the three institutions which has led to the creation of an interfaculty Post Herbarium Committee at AUB. The purpose of this committee is to discuss and make known the needs of the Post Herbarium with a view to action. Thus despite the absence of a trained taxonomist on the staff at AUB, efforts were started to purchase the material needed and make plans for the rehabilitation of the Post Herbarium.

In line with this effort, the Darwin Initiative has also supported the training of a member of the AUB staff in herbarium techniques. One of us, NS, has been able to undertake a visit to the herbaria at Kew and Reading to observe and discuss ways in which the Post Herbarium could be rehabilitated and better curated, as well as a visit to enroll on the International Course in Herbarium Techniques, offered by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

The American University of Beirut has also supported the rehabilitation efforts. Funds have been made available to purchase additional cabinets, a freezer, a computer and a scanner for the Post Herbarium. In addition, the ongoing Campus Master Planning at AUB will consider the relocation of the Post Herbarium to provide more adequate environment, more space and exposure to public use.

A revision of the folders revealed that the Post Herbarium contains many specimens that were acquired from other regions, such as Europe and the USA. Current efforts at reorganising the herbarium include the geographical separation of specimens into separate genus folders for: 1. Lebanon, 2. Rest of the Middle East, 3. Europe, 4. Africa and 5. Rest of the World. Accordingly, a major curation of the Herbarium is being undertaken. Specimens are being placed in new folders. Species from Europe, Africa and the Rest of the World are being arranged alphabetically.

During this curatorial effort, special attention is being given to type specimens. Out of the six cabinets (one-sixth of the herbarium) that have been rehabilitated so far, 50 type specimens have been found. These are being placed in protective red folders, within which a photocopy of the protologue is included. Type specimens are being scanned and will therefore be available for consultation on the internet.

In an attempt to preserve the herbarium specimens and to improve access to and use of the Post Herbarium, the American University of Beirut in collaboration with Ostfold University College, Norway, has undertaken a project to digitize the *Flora of Syria, Palestine and Sinai* and the herbarium specimens housed in the Post Herbarium. A computer programme was designed for this purpose to publish the digitized information as a searchable database. Herbarium specimens were scanned at high resolution (300 dpi) and displayed in several formats each providing further magnification of the specimen. Images of specimens are linked with the digitized information related to the specimen in the Post Flora. This site currently includes the digital version of the *Flora of Syria, Palestine and Sinai* and only a sample of the herbarium specimen images.

We are pleased that the collection is being put back on course to become a valuable resource for further inventories of the flora of Lebanon, an aid to identify plants and their conservation assessment and the foundation for a new Flora of Lebanon.

References

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