

20th Conference of AETFAT
 (Association for the Taxonomic Study of the Flora of Tropical Africa)

"BIODIVERSITY OF AFRICAN PLANTS – CHALLENGES IN A CHANGING WORLD"

Stellenbosch University (SU), 13-17 January 2014

Opening Remarks by SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof H Russel Botman

Thank you, chair. Good morning, everyone! *Bonjour, Mesdames et Messieurs. Bienvenues à Stellenbosch. Goeie more, almal! Habari gani? Karibuni!*

Distinguished guests:

- Members of the Organising Secretariat
- Delegates from all over the world
- Colleagues
- Ladies and gentlemen ...

Welcome to South Africa and to our beautiful campus. It is an honour for Stellenbosch University to host this Conference of AETFAT. Having been formed in 1951, your organisation is holding its 20th Conference, which is a good number, because this year we are celebrating 20 years of freedom here in post-apartheid South Africa.

Of course, this brings to mind the passing late last year of the founding father of our democracy, former President Nelson Mandela. I want to use this opportunity to pay respect to the great man, who was revered not only on these shores, but across our continent and the rest of the world. I ask that we all stand for a moment of silence...

Thank you. So much has been said about Madiba, but there is one story in particular that you might find interesting. It happened in Pollsmoor Prison, not too far from here, where Mandela and his comrades were transferred to after 18 years on Robben Island.

Within a few weeks of arriving, they noticed that the flat roof of their building had lots of space and received plenty of sunlight. They decided to start grow vegetables, and Madiba was to one to ask permission ... which they eventually got.

They were given 16 empty oil drums – cut in half and filled with soil, so they had 32 giant pots. In these they grew “onions, eggplant, cabbage, cauliflower, beans, spinach, carrots, cucumbers, broccoli, beetroot, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, strawberries, and much more.” In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela writes, “At its height, I had a small farm with nearly nine hundred plants.”

The interesting thing is that Mandela and his fellow inmates shared the vegetables that they grew with their prison wardens. In these and other ways, the seeds of peace and reconciliation were planted, which flowered into a political settlement that is still bearing fruit to this day.

Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen, when I was in primary school in Kroonstad, we were allocated a small piece of land and told we must learn something about soil, plant types,

plant products, etc. One day I discovered it was not happening at the white schools. So, I asked the principal, "Why?" And he told me "Most of you people are going to work on our farms."

Of course the cultivation of vegetables is not the same as studying flora in its natural habitat. But what these two practices have in common, is respect for life. And since all life is interconnected, the fate of humankind is inseparably intertwined with the welfare of our whole plane, including plant life.

Globally the realisation is growing that we have to pollute less, consume less, do less damage to our environment. And since conservation starts with determining what there is, plant taxonomy is fundamentally important. In fact, it is the foundation of all botany. Chairperson, I learnt something about taxonomy from Prof Kristo Pienaar in my days as a student.

Africa poses many challenges and opportunities. I find the Conference theme very relevant: "Biodiversity of African plants – challenges in a changing world". So immense is the diversity of plant life on our continent that our knowledge thereof is far from complete. And so numerous are the threats faced by plant life on our continent that our task is similarly far from complete.

All of you in this field certainly have your work cut out for you! And this Conference provides a great opportunity for sharing knowledge and learning from each other. That's why Stellenbosch University is happy to support it

Let me particularly welcome the students and young researchers from across Africa who have joined us. You are the next generation of scholars and academics that our continent needs. You are our hope for the future.

Africa has made good strides the past decade. Now, we need to keep going and pick up speed in order to make life better for every man, woman and child on our continent. And the one resource that holds the key to our prosperity is not oil or gold or diamonds, but knowledge.

That is why Stellenbosch University is forming knowledge coalitions across our continent and the rest of the world. This is how Africa will develop the thought leadership that it needs to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Welcome, again, to all of you. Our hope is that your contributions here will be like the seeds and seedlings that flourished in Mandela's garden.

Enjoy the Conference, and your time here. I am sure you will find our botanical gardens and the plant life in this part of the world very interesting. We are proud to be located within the Cape Floristic Kingdom. Enjoy what is on offer, and do come back again soon – to study and collaborate on research ... or just for a visit.