

Botanical capital

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The Australasian Systematic Botany Society held their 2015 annual conference, 29 November–3 December, in Canberra, Australia. The location, in the Australian national capital, inspired the conference title ‘Building Our Botanical Capital’. The conference featured talks and posters on a broad range of topics of interest to the society’s membership, from ‘Species delimitation, new species, and cryptic diversity’ to ‘Phylogenetics’, and from ‘Assembly and visualisation of morphological data’ to ‘Genomic data in plant systematics’. Of particular relevance to the conference theme were symposia on ‘Collections-based science’, ‘Integrated floras, eFloras, and online keys’, and ‘Decadal plan for Australasian biodiversity science’. The high quality of the conference stimulated the editors of *Australian Systematic Botany* to invite all presenters to contribute to this special issue dedicated to the conference.

Beyond an entertaining play on words, the conference theme prompted serious reflection on the status of systematic botany in our region. Invoking the language of economics, ‘Building Our Botanical Capital’, suggests a forward looking, investment-focused agenda. The conference highlighted the efforts of the society and its membership in building two forms of botanical capital; intellectual, or human, capital, and assets and infrastructure. As outlined by the society’s president in this issue (Crayn 2016), the Australasian Systematic Botany Society has always prioritised investing in the next generation of systematic botanists, and the society’s conferences showcase the energy, enthusiasm and high quality work of its student members. The conference awards two student prizes (sponsored by *Australian Systematic Botany*), one for best oral presentation (The Pauline Ladiges Prize) awarded to Ben Anderson for his work on *Triodia* (Anderson *et al.* 2016), and one for best poster (now called The *Australian Systematic Botany* Journal prize) awarded to Charles Foster for his work on the angiosperm evolutionary timescale (Foster *et al.* 2016a). Many high quality student talks lead to articles in *Australian Systematic Botany* (e.g. Foster *et al.* 2016b and Telford *et al.* 2016 in this issue; and Weber and Schmidt-Lebuhn 2015 in an earlier issue), and are eligible for the *Australian Systematic Botany* student paper prize (in 2015 awarded to Rutherford *et al.* 2015). Reflecting on student contributions, a common refrain at the 2015 ASBS conference was that the future of systematic botany is bright, and more generally, the student presentations at ASBS conferences are often the highlight.

Beyond training the next generation, ‘Building Our Botanical Capital’ suggests investing in assets and infrastructure. Clearly herbaria and their collections are a key part of our botanical capital, and this was amply demonstrated by speakers at the 2015 ASBS conference. Increasingly, collections provide the foundation for botanical infrastructure. *Australia’s Virtual Herbarium* (<http://avh.chah.org.au/>) and the *Atlas of Living*

Australia (<http://www.ala.org.au/>) provide excellent examples of the utilities that can be built on the foundations of Australian biodiversity collections. But these utilities also highlight the importance of investing in the collections themselves to ensure high quality of the underlying data (i.e. identifications and locality data). Advances in information technology are proving transformative in how systematic botany is conducted. In particular, the intellectual capital embedded in accumulated botanical knowledge can be made broadly and rapidly accessible. A particular exciting development in this area is the shift to electronic floras. The online *Flora of New Zealand* (<http://www.nzflora.info/>) impressed conference participants, as did the progress of individual state eFloras in Australia, and the *eFlora of Australia* (Knapp 2016) is eagerly awaited. However, as Kevin Thiele discusses in this issue (Thiele 2016), careful consideration of the implementation will help ensure that eFloras become a valuable part of our botanical capital.

The collection of articles in this special issue provides a snapshot of an engaging and far-ranging conference that presented a highly productive systematic botany community in Australasia, looking forward to a bright future. These articles present research at the forefront of systematic botany, including in developing novel approaches for answering research questions (Cross *et al.* 2016), applications in phylogenetics (Cargill *et al.* 2016; Foster *et al.* 2016b), biogeography (Schmidt-Lebuhn and Smith 2016) and taxonomy (Telford *et al.* 2016). On behalf of the editors of *Australian Systematic Botany*, I am delighted to present this special issue and look forward to a continuing, close association between the journal and the Australasian Systematic Botany Society.

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