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The Community Foundation of Sarasota County

THE FEBRUARY 2018 THUNDER DRAGON ORCHID CONSERVATION PROJECT

Report for the grant #20181806 of the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, provided by the Friends of Orchid Research Fund (FOR), established by Russell and Sharon Stephens of Sarasota, Florida. The received amount was \$ 812.00

On behalf of the Sarasota Orchid Society (SOS), as a member and in charge of the research program, I hereby submit a report of the activities during, and results from the February 2018 Thunder Dragon Orchid Conservation Project (TDOCP) in Bhutan. This project is an ongoing collaboration between SOS and the National Biodiversity Centre (NBC) in Serbithang, Thimphu, Bhutan. The NBC is an independent branch of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests.

The project's primary focus is for SOS to assist in developing a higher understanding and appreciation of Bhutan's native orchid flora. This is done primarily by supporting and educating Bhutanese students and workers in orchid botany, cultivation, propagation and conservation. A secondary focus is to educate and advertise to the rest of the world about the richness of the Bhutanese orchid flora, and to encourage orchid eco-tourism, which can become a considerable income for the country. The eco-tourism in general is the second most important income for this poor country. It is immensely important to encourage Bhutan's government and the people to keep protecting their natural resources and utilize them in sustainable manners only.

*The February 2018 project focused on searching for additional populations of the critically endangered orchid *Paphiopedilum venustum*. This once frequent very attractive orchid was originally widespread along the limestone belt that parallels the southern border between Bhutan and India. Some 50-60 years ago commercial plant collectors from India entered Bhutan in order to search for this particular orchid, in addition to several other showy and commercially valuable species. In some areas the foreign collectors developed collaborations with cash poor local villagers. Prior to 2018 only a single population of *P. venustum* was known, consisting of two small groups of approximately ten plants each. A couple of previously known populations that were visited have been devastated by farm road constructions and/or looting.*

After suggesting that the search for this particular species should be performed near and below recently discovered new populations of a closely related and threatened species: *Paphiopedilum fairrieanum*, one new and healthy population of the critically endangered *P. venustum* was discovered in an isolated part of the country. This particular area had not been visited by foreigners prior to our visit so our team created quite a stir. But all in a positive way!

A small number of plants of both *Paphiopedilum* species have been secured for cultivation

at the Royal Botanic Garden in Serbithang, Thimphu. As long as they are not molested by rats the plants grow and flower well. The rat problem is increasing though, so a strategy to deal with this issue is planned. Since killing is a sin in a Buddhist belief system there were some concerns about setting the traps. Bhutanese law permits "killing" in self defense, however, and to protect one's crops (there are plenty of "foragers" in this country) so we have been granted permission to kill the rats inside the orchidarium if we can catch them. The purpose to cultivate and hopefully propagate the endangered orchids is to attempt re-introducing plants into previously known locations, and also to establish new ones in more protected areas.

Articles covering the events of this trip are planned but nothing has been published so far. Whenever something gets in print though, copies will be forwarded to the Community Foundation.

With sincere appreciation

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