

ARTHUR HUGH MILLINGTON SYNGE (1951–2018)



Hugh Syngé in 2006. *Stephen Durnford*

Hugh Syngé was not a BSBI member in recent years, but as a plant conservationist he was familiar to many Society members through his European flora work, *Plantlife* and the magazine *Plant Talk*. A conservation pioneer 'before it was profitable or popular', Hugh was variously director, manager, fund-raiser, consultant, convener, rapporteur, writer and editor. Above all he played a central role in putting plants alongside animals at the forefront of international conservation. Born in Woking, Surrey, on 4th August 1951, his father was Patrick Syngé, author and editor of many Royal Horticultural Society and other horticultural publications. Educated at Rugby School and graduating in horticulture from Wye College, in 1973, Hugh joined the herbarium at the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, helping Ronald Melville to assemble data for a first plant Red Data Book. Subsequently Gren Lucas and he compiled the 250 case histories of geographically restricted threatened plants that became the seminal *IUCN Plant Red Data*

Book (1978).

In the 1980s Hugh continued to work at Kew, designing and developing the IUCN and WWF-International Plants Conservation Programme, part of which today is Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI). An early enthusiast for electronic media, the Threatened Plants Database he set up at Kew was a foundation of the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre in Cambridge. He and Danish botanist Ole Hamann also created, with the World Health Organization, a global medicinal plant conservation programme, and he helped the European Commission draft botanical sections of the EU Habitats Directive.

In 1990, having failed to obtain a senior post in the USA, Hugh became a freelance consultant. That year he and five others launched *Plantlife*, of which he was the first Secretary to the Board, and he was a prime mover in the conservation network *Planta Europa*. Hard-working, meticulous, reserved, fastidious, even puritanical, he expected high standards of his collaborators and was not always an easy person to work with. He brought to all his projects energy, an incisive intellect and practical output in readable prose, ever ensuring that 'it is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same unto the end, until it be thoroughly finished, that yieldeth the true glory'.

Hugh liked writing and magazines, and was an expert at creating clear, concise conservation messages. In 1994 he and I founded *Plant Talk* ('if the plants could talk'), of which he was Director and (from 1999) Editor. This colour-illustrated international quarterly magazine for plants and their conservation was published between 1995 and 2006 and achieved 44 issues. It was widely admired and appreciated but never enjoyed wide enough support from the academic establishment. It made Hugh a master of electronic typesetting, artwork and page layout, and he designed and typeset a number of books, including five BSBI handbooks *Dandelions*, *Docks and Knotweeds*, *Evening-primroses*, *Pondweeds* and *Sea Beans and Nickar Nuts*.

After *Plant Talk*, Hugh returned to a long-held interest in renewable energy to set up Soltrac, a solar energy power company. He later convened

and chaired Nadder Community Energy, using solar energy income to assist his local community of Tisbury and district in Wiltshire. A keen gardener, and latterly cook, like his father he specialised in growing lilies and other bulbs. Devoted to his many projects and busy with a worldwide web of colleagues and friends, he did not marry.

In 2007 Plantlife presented him with their Award for Lifetime Achievement in conservation and BBC Wildlife magazine voted him one of the UK's 20 most influential conservationists. He died at his Wiltshire home of aggressive bone cancer on 4th August 2018, his 67th birthday.

John Akeroyd