

COLLECTIONS NEWS

# A Safari of Plants: The 11th Conference on Cycad Biology

**NOT YOUR TYPICAL PLANT EXCURSION,** we were packed like sheep in the back of a Toyota 4x4 headed for what appeared to be an impossible track up the boulder strewn hill. Our driver and guide Neil, whose farm we were on, assured us that he takes this route all the time. Our destination was a saddle between two mountains in the distance and waiting for us there were three different cycads — *Encephalartos princeps*, *E. friderici-guilhelmi* and *E. caffer*. This was the perfect culmination of the post-conference tour of the 11th Conference on Cycad Biology in South Africa. Our group experienced 14 different species of cycads in the wild and the myriad plants that grow in association with them that we know so well from the gardens at Lotusland.

The conference itself was held outside of Nelspruit, South Africa, in White River, and was hosted by the Cycad Society of South Africa. Because of our globally important cycad collection, Lotusland curatorial staff has attended this conference almost since its inception, which is held every three years in distinct

corners of the world. The conference offered much valuable information with topics covering everything from conservation, ethnobotany and horticulture, to genetics and systematics, pollination biology and evolution. It was an amazing opportunity to interact with and reinforce our relationships with the world leaders in the study of cycads.

In conjunction with the conference is the meeting of the IUCN Species Survival Commission's Cycad Specialist Group (CSG), of which Lotusland is a member. Being the most threatened plant group on the planet, the CSG works tirelessly to conserve individual species of cycads and their habitats while working to educate and raise awareness around this unique plant group. We are in the preliminary stages of working with the CSG and colleagues in South Africa to develop a species survival action plan for *Encephalartos heenanii* — one of the most threatened species of cycad. In 2012 Lotusland produced seed of *E. heenanii* for the first time ever in the United States and most likely the first time ever in a public botanic garden anywhere



LEFT: Paul Mills with an immense plant of *Encephalartos princeps*. TOP RIGHT: *Encephalartos heenanii* BOTTOM RIGHT: *Encephalartos horridus* with *Aloe ferox* in the foreground

in the world. These plants will be used as part of an “assurance colony” for breeding and reintroduction to the wild over the long term.

Lotusland is part of a strong network of cycad specialists and is starting to coordinate with researchers, allowing samples to be taken from our collection for DNA studies of the evolutionary history of this group of plants. Often promoted as plants from the time of dinosaurs, modern day cycads are believed to be only about 12 million years old — it is their distant ancestors that were around during the dinosaur's heyday. Hopefully by aiding in this research Lotusland's can help to further unravel the mysteries of these enigmatic plants. — Paul Mills