

Orchid Fever/Eric Hansen responds to Kew allegations

Open letter from Eric Hansen, author of *Orchid Fever*, to the American Orchid Society, organizers of the 2002 World Orchid Conference, Royal Horticultural Society, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the Orchid Digest Corporation, local orchid societies, botanical institutions, orchid growers, scientists, hobbyists and general readers: I have recently learned that Prof. Peter Crane, Director of RBG, Kew, has once again taken it upon himself to circulate letters to many of you about the factual basis of my book - *Orchid Fever*.

I have already addressed earlier statements made by Prof. Crane which he included in a similar mass mailing last year. My detailed rebuttal to those statements appeared in the American Orchid Society magazine 'Orchids'. It now appears that Prof. Crane has come up with a new claim that *Orchid Fever* is misleading because it suggests that Kew staff behaved improperly in their dealings with Henry Azadehdel, the orchid collector and convicted smuggler of thirteen, nursery-grown, CITES Appendix II orchids. Crane uses the term 'no impropriety' on the part of Kew staff in his recent letter which suggests some sort of minor oversight. I am uncertain what 'impropriety' means in the British context, but my statements in *Orchid Fever* are solely concerned with whether the solicitation and acceptance of rare orchids from Azadehdel was ethical, or legal, and if the plants were accompanied by valid CITES permits.

Prof. Crane's comments have been reprinted in full in 'Orchid Review' as well as 'Orchid Digest'. In the spirit of fair play, I requested an opportunity to write unedited rebuttals of equal length to these accusations in both publications, but I was refused that courtesy by Henry Oakeley at 'Orchid Review' and by Harold Koopowitz and Alejandro Capriles at 'Orchid Digest'. While I understand that these individuals have their personal reasons for denying me equal time, it does not serve the orchid community to stifle open and public debate. Because many orchid people who read these journals also follow online discussions, I felt that this would be an appropriate venue to post my response to Crane's statements.

Chapter 5 of *Orchid Fever* describes Henry Azadehdel and his involvement with Kew staff in great detail, and I invite each one of you to carefully examine the precise wording of the text. There were early threats from Kew regarding this chapter but those threats evaporated upon presentation of solid documentary evidence to support my statements. If Kew was unable to challenge these plain facts at the time of publication, one must wonder why, 18 months later, they are now trying to assert that members of their staff were not guilty of any impropriety.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the fact checking process and legal reviews carried out by reputable publishing houses, I would like to describe the process as it applies to my book *Orchid Fever*.

Orchid Fever is the result of nearly seven years of careful research, interviews, follow-up interviews and painstaking fact-checking with the help of experts in the various fields covered in the book. The completed manuscript went through an eight week, line-by-line, review by the legal department of my US publisher, Random House, which is arguably one of the most distinguished and well respected publishers in the world. Publishers are legally responsible for the words of their authors, and for this reason they closely examine what is submitted in manuscript form. All statements must be backed up by compelling documentation. Following the legal review, the entire manuscript was meticulously fact checked for several months by independent botanists, orchid taxonomists, experts in CITES history, law and trade regulations, orchid breeders and conservationists, as well as people

from many other associated fields of study. The author had no say in the selection of these expert fact checkers and was not allowed contact with these people during this process.

My UK publisher, Methuen, another highly regarded publishing house, insisted on their own legal and fact checking review which lasted another four weeks. This was to make certain that the text was fully in compliance with UK law. During both of the legal reviews and fact checking procedures each sentence and its meaning was carefully and thoroughly scrutinized. The back up documentation for *Orchid Fever* occupies approximately eight linear feet of shelf space in my office. So with this in mind, let us take a closer look at the recent 'facts' presented by Prof. Peter Crane.

Prof. Crane states that Henry Azadehdel "...contacted at least six members of Kew's staff at various times in 1984 and offered to exchange plants with Kew from his collection." I am uncertain how much fact checking Prof. Crane has done, but according to letters from the Kew archives, the office of the CITES Scientific Authority for plants in the UK - which is located at Kew, and from court documents from the trial of Henry Azadehdel (copies of which I have in my possession), Prof. Crane has the story turned completely backwards. The requests for rare orchids came from Kew staff, not from Mr. Azadehdel as suggested in Crane's letter. As I point out in *Orchid Fever*, it was Kew staff that requested undescribed new species, as well as rare and endangered, CITES protected orchids from Azadehdel. The meaning of these letters is very clear. In one letter from 1984, Azadehdel is advised, by Dr. Phillip Cribb, on where *Paphiopedilum malipoense*, a very rare species of slipper orchid, might be found. Other letters acknowledge the safe arrival of mature specimens of rare species that, to the best of my knowledge, were not available as nursery grown plants through commercial nurseries, nor were wild collected plants legally obtainable without proper CITES permits. CITES does allow for an exchange of wild-collected species between bonafide research institutions for scientific study, but Azadehdel is not a research institution and Kew staff would have been very well aware of this fact.

All of this correspondence was written on Kew stationary, by Kew staff to Henry Azadehdel. As I have already pointed out to Prof. Crane and others, this information was not, by any stretch of the imagination, intended to reflect official policy at RBG, Kew, or to discredit this fine institution which I hold in very high regard. The purpose of my comments was to bring into question the working relationship between Henry Azadehdel and certain members of Kew's staff. Even after Dr. Cribb had alerted the authorities about the possible illegal activities of Mr. Azadehdel (and had become actively involved in the investigation), he continued to solicit and accept CITES protected orchids from Mr. Azadehdel (letter from Cribb to Azadehdel, dated 3 April 1985, acknowledging receipt of *P. javanicum* for the live collection at Kew).

Following publication of the UK edition of *Orchid Fever* in early 2000, Dr. Cribb instructed his solicitors/attorneys to threaten my UK publisher with legal action for obscure and vague reasons outlined in a 12-page, single-spaced document that can be politely described as angry, confused, and in parts - incoherent. Upon threat of legal action for libel, Dr. Cribb's solicitors demanded a financial settlement, retractions, and a public apology from the author. In response, my publisher repeatedly asked for a clear, concise and final list of relevant passages along with page numbers and direct quotes from the book. This sort of concise and final list has never been received by my publisher.

Since publication of *Orchid Fever*, Dr. Cribb's solicitors have spent more than 12 months looking for inaccuracies, factual errors and libelous comments. They have corrected the spellings of *Sigmatostalix* (to *Sigmatostalix*), and the common name of a pit viper found in Malaysia, but they have come up with nothing of substance.

My UK publisher has courteously refused to make any changes apart from several instances of word usage to make the author's meaning more clear. This refusal to be bullied or intimidated by legal threats is admirable and correct because the book is based on fact which is backed up by hard data, court documents, personal letters, email exchanges and other solid evidence. There has been no legal action taken against the publisher or author for the simple reason that there was never any basis for legal action in the first place.

Over a five year period, I actively and repeatedly solicited Dr. Cribb's participation and input regarding his mutually beneficial working relationship with Henry Azadehdel, but for whatever reasons he declined my offers. These offers were presented in the spirit of fair play. I articulated exactly what sort of information I was looking for and this approach to fact finding far exceeds the most stringent standards for responsible journalism and writing. Had Dr. Cribb offered an explanation I would have included this in the book. In fact, I once again extend this offer to him, and I will carefully consider his comments for possible inclusion in the future printings of *Orchid Fever*.

The last challenge from Dr. Cribb and his solicitors was directed at my statement of fact that Dr. Cribb had made an undercover scouting visit to the Popow nursery prior to the (now legendary) armed raid and confiscation of nearly 17,000 orchids in 1988. Dr. Cribb and his solicitors claimed that no prior visit took place, that the statement was untrue and should therefore be deleted from the book. My UK publisher and I have copies of the German court document that provides full details and the date that Dr. Cribb made his prior visit to the Popow nursery. Since mentioning this document to Dr. Cribb's solicitors seven months ago, we have not heard back from these fact-finding gentlemen.

Prof. Crane claims that *Orchid Fever* "...denigrates individuals and institutions that are actively trying to conserve orchids in the wild." But, of course, it must be understood that Prof. Crane is simply referring to himself, his own institution and the various efforts of his close colleagues. I find this statement especially curious in light of the fact that I have recently been honored with an invitation to present a lecture on orchid conservation at the 2002 World Orchid Conference in Malaysia. Many independent, well respected, and impartial experts in the orchid world have read *Orchid Fever* and their comments directly contradict those offered by Prof. Crane.

Eric Hagsater, the former Chairman of the Orchid Specialist Group, IUCN Species Survival Commission, called *Orchid Fever* "Most enjoyable" and went on to say that the book "...should be required reading for anyone seriously interested in orchid conservation." Michael Lidsky, CITES Program Coordinator USDA/APHIS, praised the book for its insights into problems with CITES implementation, and he found the book "...spellbinding." The highly respected Danish diplomat, environmental visionary and orchid taxonomist, Dr. Gunnar Seidenfaden (who was entrusted with the responsibility of putting orchids on CITES at the Washington Convention in 1973), said that *Orchid Fever* was "A very insightful and important book...told with a fine sense of humor." Ned Nash, Director of Conservation at the American Orchid Society, called the book "Fabulous and brilliantly portrayed." Dr. Eric Christenson was quoted as saying "Powerful storytelling...balanced and well documented." Cal Dodson, Peter Raven, Kingsley Dixon, Andy Easton (Director of Education at the American Orchid Society), Joseph Arditti, Leonid Averyanov, Paul Phillips, and Alasdair Morrison have also added their enthusiastic support. The list goes on.

Given the fact that Prof. Crane's background is in academic affairs, office administration and the study of fossil flowers (especially pollen and spore dispersal from extinct taxa of the mid-Cretaceous), I believe more weight should be given to the statements of the knowledgeable experts mentioned above.

A writer's job is to tell the story in a readable, fair and balanced way. The reader, for his or her part, is ultimately responsible for his or her interpretations and conclusions about what the writer meant and whether the stories are supported by fact or fantasy. As a reader, Prof. Crane is certainly free to agree or disagree, or to understand or misinterpret my book in any way he wishes. But he must also realize that by offering his biased and misinformed opinions in such a public way that he, just like the author of *Orchid Fever*, will be subject to the same degree of scrutiny and accountability for statements made.

And so, to continue the fact finding process, I eagerly await Prof. Crane's publication of the Azadehdel/Kew letters along with a detailed explanation about their meaning. I also ask him to include copies of the CITES import permits and phyto-sanitary certificates for each one of the plants provided by Henry Azadehdel. I look forward to these and other clarifications that Prof. Crane may wish to share with us.

In the meanwhile, *Orchid Fever* will stand as written.
With regards,

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