

# Respecting communities allays biopiracy alarm

Henry Nicholls, BMN News

Fears that genetically modified organisms (GMOs) might endanger indigenous crops are all wrong, says Klaus Ammann, Director of the Botanical Garden at the University of Bern in Switzerland (<http://www.unibe.ch>). When it comes to threats on biodiversity, he said, 'It's not the transgenes, it's the subsidies.'

## Controversies

Nowhere is this more evident than in the controversy over Mexican maize, he says, where some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have expressed concern that gene sequences from Bt-transgenic corn might have 'contaminated' local crops or 'land-races'.

The main threat to these land-races are European and US food subsidies, says Ammann. This makes it cheaper for Mexico to bring in corn from the US rather than nurture its own crops, he says. 'We can't spend life looking in the rear mirror. We need to influence evolution,' he said. 'You can only save the land-races by developing them,' he told *BioMedNet News* (<http://news.bmn.com>).



Ammann expressed these views as part of a broader argument that the West has a lot to learn from the developing world. In particular, he says, those engaged in bioprospecting for new drugs are guilty of 'intellectual colonialism' and often fail to appreciate the vast knowledge of local people.

'Go and speak to those who really know the flora,' he said, 'and you'll be amazed about the diversity and the richness.' It is through respecting this knowledge that accusations of 'biopiracy' aimed at overseas researchers can be avoided, he says.

## The good, the bad and the smugglers

Last month, a federal grand jury in Tampa, Florida indicted a nursery owner James Michael Kovach for smuggling protected orchids of the genus *Phragmipedium* from Peru into the USA. This is biopiracy, says Ammann. 'I have no mercy with such people,' he said, '[But] we should really differentiate between criminals like these guys and others who do good research.'

Bo Hammer Jensen, Director of the Danish biotech company Novozymes (<http://www.novozymes.com>), agrees that 'all this talk about biopiracy is a disincentive [to research].' Countries rich in biodiversity are nervous of being exploited and are putting up more and more bureaucratic rules, he says. This has slowed down access to these zones of biodiversity.

It is understandable that local people should want recognition of their rights, says Jensen, and should want to play a part in the development of new products. But he questions whether biodiversity-rich countries are really interested in promoting access to their resources.

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