



NATIONAL TROPICAL BOTANICAL GARDEN

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NYBG Botanist Dr. Michael J. Balick to be Awarded Fairchild Medal for Plant Exploration

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Kalāheo, Kauaʻi, Hawaiʻi, USA (January 10, 2018) — Dr. Michael J. Balick, Vice President for Botanical Science and Philecology Curator at the Institute for Economic Botany, The New York Botanical Garden (NYBG), has been named the 2018 recipient of the David Fairchild Medal for Plant Exploration. In an announcement from its headquarters in Hawaiʻi, the National Tropical Botanical Garden (NTBG) recognized Dr. Balick for a career spanning over four decades of botanical fieldwork and research around the globe.

The Fairchild Medal will be presented to Dr. Balick at a black-tie dinner at NTBG's historical garden and former residence of David Fairchild The Kampong in Coconut Grove, Florida on January 26. The following day Dr. Balick will give a public lecture entitled "Plants, People, and Culture: Exploring the Roots of Wisdom."

Like the Fairchild Medal's namesake, Dr. Balick has many decades of experience conducting botanical fieldwork and exploration in regions as diverse as Central and South America, the Caribbean, South Asia, and the Middle East. Much of Dr. Balick's work since 1998 has focused on understanding the diversity, distribution, and uses of plants in tropical Pacific Islands, including The Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, and most recently Vanuatu.

Dr. Balick has studied and written extensively on the medicinal, culinary and toxic properties of tropical plants. As a lead researcher in the Belize Ethnobotany Project, and with a deep understanding of ethnomedicinal plants and both traditional and indigenous healing practices, Dr. Balick has co-authored such titles as *Rainforest Remedies: One Hundred Healing Herbs of Belize* and *Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants*.

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Michael Balick grew up in Delaware. As a high school student he was inspired by Fairchild's seminal 1938 book *The World Was My Garden*. "After reading that book, I was hooked — this was to be the field for me," Dr. Balick recalled.

While pursuing his undergraduate degree in horticulture, Dr. Balick studied under Dr. Richard W. Lighty. During that time he conducted fieldwork in Israel, studying the plants of the deserts, oases, and mountains. Following his graduation from the University of Delaware, he moved to Costa Rica in the mid-1970s where he helped build the Las Cruces Tropical Botanical Garden (now called Wilson Botanical Garden).

Upon being accepted to Harvard University, Dr. Balick was inspired by the famed plant explorer Richard Evans Schultes who sent him on his first field collecting trip to the Amazon in 1976. Following his introduction to tropical botany and indigenous peoples, Dr. Balick continued to study under Schultes, graduating from Harvard in 1980 with a Ph.D. in biology and specialty in ethnobotany and business administration.



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A serendipitous encounter with Dr. Diane Ragone, Director of NTBG's Breadfruit Institute, led Dr. Balick to expand his fieldwork into the Pacific where he embarked on documenting the flora, ethnobotanical traditions, and associated linguistics of Micronesian island groups.

Dr. Balick explained that when conducting a major study of a particular region, he seeks to address three questions: What is the composition of the local flora? How do people use the plants both traditionally and in modern times? How can those evidence-based traditional medicinal uses of plants benefit primary healthcare delivery in the local setting?

He and his many colleagues have found that by developing an appreciation for the local flora as well as understanding its multitude of traditional uses, communities develop a greater interest in conserving their forests and other native vegetation, as well as the traditional information on the management and use of these vital natural resources.

This process, beginning with basic botanical exploration, has led to establishment of national and community conservation areas along with a more sustainable and resilient lifestyle in the face of global change in many parts of the world where Balick has worked.

As he noted, "this to me is the essence of the work — establishing tangible connections between forests, communities, livelihoods, and conservation."

Currently, Dr. Balick and his NYBG collaborator Dr. Gregory M. Plunkett are helping to lead a ten-year project called [Plants and People of Tafea Province, Vanuatu](#). The project focuses on the collection and study of everything from the microscopic to forest transects on multiple islands including endophytic plants and fleshy fungi, lichens, mosses, and bryophytes, as well as ferns and some 2,500 higher fruiting and flowering plant species.

Collaborating with linguists from Swarthmore College, Dr. Balick's team has also recorded and documented several thousand plant-related words in multiple languages on five islands in southern Vanuatu in an effort spearheaded by Dr. K. David Harrison to develop web-based "Talking Dictionaries" that will help keep these languages alive.

Because Dr. Balick and his colleagues from the University of Hawai'i and the University of the South Pacific were working in Vanuatu before, during, and after the devastating Cyclone Pam in 2015, they have been able to examine the impacts and recovery of Pacific island forests following catastrophic storms.

In response to Dr. Balick's selection as the 2018 Fairchild Medal recipient, Gregory Long, Chief Executive Officer and The William C. Steere Sr. President of The New York Botanical Garden said, "The New York Botanical Garden is extremely proud of the vital research that Dr. Balick has conducted around the world as one of the leaders of the Botanical Garden's 200-member science staff. Mike exemplifies the Garden's long-standing dedication to exploring and documenting the many complex ways in which people use plants to sustain and improve their lives. This distinguished honor recognizes his achievement in helping local people conserve their unique traditional plant knowledge and customs."



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Dr. Wade Davis, Professor of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia commented, “No one could be more deserving of this award than Mike Balick. In so many ways he is, as both an ethnobotanist and an economic botanist, the true inheritor of the legacy of both David Fairchild and his own mentor, Richard Evans Schultes.”

NTBG’s President and CEO Chipper Wichman called Dr. Balick an “outstanding choice” for the Fairchild Medal. “Over the past four decades Mike has been at the cutting edge of what we now call ‘biocultural conservation’ — the conservation of both the natural world and the indigenous cultures that have evolved with it,” Wichman said, adding: “As an economic botanist, Mike exemplifies Fairchild’s desire to enrich human society by traveling to far-away places to search for new plants and cultural knowledge.”

Dr. David Lorence, NTBG’s Director of Science and Conservation, and a member of the Fairchild Medal nominating committee, said of Dr. Balick, “Beyond his work in plant taxonomy, I believe Mike’s most important contributions have been in documenting the myriad uses of plants by indigenous peoples in tropical areas such as Belize and various islands in Micronesia and Melanesia.”

Dr. Diane Ragone, Director of NTBG’s Breadfruit Institute, called Dr. Balick a “passionate scientist who has devoted his career to understanding the connections between people and plants,” adding, “he shares this vanishing knowledge through scientific publications, books, and most importantly, by working closely with indigenous people in the field and training students.”

Upon learning of his selection to receive the Fairchild Medal, Dr. Balick said, “This is an incredible honor. To be in the company of those people who have won this award is nothing short of unbelievable and extraordinary...some of my personal botanical heroes are amongst those who have received the Fairchild Medal and it is a humbling experience to be part of that group.”

Dr. Balick noted that over the course of his career he has worked with hundreds of people in some of the most remote parts of the world in the quest for plants and knowledge of their traditional uses. “They all share in this award,” he said.

Dr. David Fairchild, one of the greatest and most influential horticulturists and plant collectors in the United States, devoted his life to plant exploration, searching the world for useful plants suitable for introduction into the country. As an early “Indiana Jones” type explorer, he conducted field trips throughout Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, the South Pacific, the Caribbean, South America, the Middle East, and East and South Africa during the late 1800s and early 1900s. These explorations resulted in the introduction of many tropical plants of economic importance to the U.S. including sorghum, nectarines, unique species of bamboo, dates, and varieties of mangoes. In addition, as director of the Office of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction of the U.S. Department of Agriculture during the early 20th Century, Dr. Fairchild was instrumental in the introduction of more than 5,000 selected varieties and species of useful plants, such as Durum wheat, Japanese rices, Sudan grass, Chinese soy beans, Chinese elms, persimmons, and pistachios.



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Fairchild and his wife, Marian Bell Fairchild, daughter of Alexander Graham Bell, purchased property in South Florida in 1916 and created both a home and an “introduction garden” for plant species found on his expeditions. He named the property “The Kampong,” the Malay word for “village.” The tropical species he collected from Southeast Asia in the 1930s and 1940s are still part of the heritage collections of The Kampong. The property is the only U.S. mainland garden owned by NTBG, which has four gardens and five preserves in Hawai‘i. The organization is dedicated to conservation, research, and education relating to the world’s rare and endangered tropical plants.

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