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COURTESY JON LETMAN
 Ghilleen Prance, former director of Britain's Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and one of the world's foremost botanists, works each winter with the National Tropical Botanical Garden based in Kalaheo, Kauai. [CLICK FOR LARGE](#)

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Weathering climate change

A respected botanist urges action on climate change and warns against the dangers of overdevelopment in Hawaii

By Jon Letman
Special to the Star-Bulletin

DURING HIS most recent two-month sabbatical in Hawaii, renowned British botanist and ardent conservationist Sir Ghillean Prance praised Hawaii's unique culture, flora and fauna, but also expressed grave concern about threats to the Aloha State's fragile environment as well as the effect America has on global climate change.

Since 2000, Prance has spent several months each winter in Hawaii, working with the National Tropical Botanical Garden as a consultant, visiting researcher and today, at the request of NTBG trustees, as McBryde Senior Research Fellow.

Prance, who occupied several senior positions at the New York Botanical Garden over 25 years and served 11 years as director of England's Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, now divides his time between botanical research, teaching a course on biodiversity at Reading University and consulting as scientific director for the Eden Project in Cornwall, England.

For nearly half a century, Prance has studied and taught around the world, specializing in the plants of the neo-tropics, particularly in the Amazon. It is the uniqueness of Hawaii's plants, however, that makes working in the United States a favorite destination for Prance.

"Had Darwin come to Hawaii instead of the Galapagos, he would have discovered the same thing -- that plants on an island find a niche and can evolve into several different species in different habitats on that island," Prance said.

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It is Hawaii's high degree of endemism -- some 90 percent of its native flora is found nowhere else -- that Prance finds so fascinating.

Speaking from NTBG headquarters on Kauai, Prance said that areas of preserved native forests such as Kokee and Waimea Canyon state parks, where rare Hawaiian plants are still found, are vital to understanding the importance of biodiversity.

BUT OVERDEVELOPMENT and the potential impact of a new interisland passenger/car ferry service scheduled to begin this summer are cause for concern, according to Prance.

"I'm worried to think of a ferry that will unload a whole lot more cars because preservation of what is on each of the islands is extremely important in terms of world botanical interest," Prance said.

As one of the founders of Kew's Millennium Seed Bank Project, Prance makes a strong case for plant conservation and the threat of global climate change.

"Biology is telling us there is some major change going on in the world. It is a very, very alarming issue," Prance warned in a stark message.

"Time is running out. If we don't change our ways soon, I think there will be a drastic effect on the plants and animals of the world."

Prance cited dramatic changes to world bird migrations and plant flowering seasons, alpine plants needing to climb higher in order to grow, ice retreat on both poles and a huge belt of Siberia where methane is escaping from bogs due to inadequate freezing as measurable effects of climate change.

Prance expressed particular concern that until recently, the United States, the world's largest producer of greenhouse gas emissions, has done very little to take heed of climate change. He noted that the United States stands virtually alone in the world by not ratifying either the Kyoto Protocol or the Convention on Biological Diversity.

"I think the message that we must change lifestyles needs to get out very strongly in the U.S.," Prance said.

AS A FREQUENT lecturer in Europe, the United States and around the world, Prance's talks on biodiversity and conservation increasingly include talk of climate change as he tries to encourage

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people to make a positive difference on a personal, as well as political, level.

"In the next U.K. election, it will be hard to know which party to vote on based on green issues as all three become greener. That is good because, really, the environment and these issues should be apolitical," Prance said.

Prance also referred to environmental damage and a misuse of financial resources in the Iraq war. "Think of what we could do for the environment with the money being spent on munitions in Iraq."

After the 1991 Gulf War, Prance visited Kuwait as the director of Kew Gardens to stimulate interest in seed banking and saw the devastation from that war first hand.

"This morning I picked up a copy of The Flora of Iraq, but unfortunately, for political reasons, Kew has had to stop its involvement and it's not being published anymore. The place is being blown to bits."

Prance does also see some positive environmental changes in the United States.

"Here in America, one of the leaders for the environment is actually a Republican, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. He's doing and saying the right things -- and acting, too," Prance noted.

Last autumn, Schwarzenegger signed California's Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 into law. The landmark legislation mandates that America's most populous state cut greenhouse gases by 25 percent by 2020, as well as imposing emissions controls on industry.

"This is good because (President) Bush can't say it's all from the Democrats. Who would have ever thought that Schwarzenegger would be doing this?"

(A similar bill capping greenhouse gas emissions was passed by the Hawaii state Legislature this year. The Global Warming Solutions Act of 2007 calls for reducing the amount of greenhouse gases created in the state to 1990 levels by the year 2020.)

PRANCE IS ALSO encouraged by a greater interest in recycling, green trends in the automobile industry and the construction of carbon-neutral buildings. He praised the NTBG's new Botanical

Kokua Line

June Watanabe

In the Military

Gregg K. Kakesako

What the Heck?

John Heckathorn

Island Images

S-B Photographers

Honolulu Lite

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Research Center for being Kauai's first LEED (Leadership for Energy and Environmental Design) compliant building.

Another notable achievement for marine and plant conservation, Prance noted, was the establishment of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument in June 2006.

The sanctuary, recently given the Hawaiian name Papahānaumokuākea, encompasses nearly 138,000 square miles and is the largest conservation area in the United States, covering an area larger than all of America's national parks combined. It is home to extensive coral reef systems, rare plants and more than 7,000 marine species, 25 percent of which are found nowhere else on Earth.

Prance rejoiced when he learned of the new monument. "Extra protection to the region can only be good for the future of the islands," he said.

From where Prance spoke on Kauai's Lawai Bay, itself home to an NTBG native plant restoration project, the monument begins just 140 miles to the northwest.

"The NTBG gardens (four in Hawaii and one in Florida) have a special role to play in the interaction between the marine and terrestrial environment," Prance said, but added, "There would be little point in doing all the other conservation work unless we solve the climate change issue."

Jon Letman is a freelance writer living in Lihue, Kauai. His work has appeared in Hawaii and national media, including the Christian Science Monitor and the Seattle Times.

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