

For immediate release

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The lost forest of Mount Mabú

Scientists based at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (RBG Kew) have led the first expedition to the previously unmapped Mount Mabú in northern Mozambique, funded by Defra's Darwin Initiative. The expedition is part of RBG Kew's ongoing work with Mozambique's government to identify priority areas for conservation in the face of rapid development.

Until just three years ago the vast area of forest was known only to villagers nearby. The team 'found' Mount Mabú with the help of Google Earth maps in 2005 while looking for sites for a conservation project on land above 1,600m where higher rainfall means there is likely to be forest.

Dr Julian Bayliss, the project's field coordinator, investigated the unexpected patch of green and used satellite photos to identify a large, unexplored forest. Following a series of scoping trips, in October and November this year an international team of 28 scientists and support staff from the UK, Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania, Belgium and Switzerland hiked into it.

Expedition leader, RBG Kew botanist Jonathan Timberlake said "The phenomenal diversity is just mind-boggling: seeing how things are adapted to little niches, to me this is the incredible thing. Even today we cannot say we know all of the world's key areas for biodiversity - there are still new ones to discover."

They found a wealth of wildlife including pygmy chameleons, Swynnerton's robin, butterflies such as the Small Striped Swordtail and Emperor Swallowtail as well as three new species, a previously undiscovered species of forest adder and many exotic plants, including a rarely seen orchid. The team brought back over 500 plant specimens and are looking forward to finding out more about the species they collected.

Jonathan continues: "This is potentially the biggest area of medium-altitude forest I'm aware of in southern Africa, yet it was not on the map, and most Mozambicans would not have even recognised the name Mount Mabú. Kew is working with the Mozambique government to protect areas like Mount Mabú and encourage local people to value the forest for its wildlife. By conserving the plant life we can help secure a future for all the other creatures we saw there."

RBG Kew is using its expertise and collections, coupled with Mozambique collections, to identify new species and areas of interest for biodiversity. RBG Kew also works to build capacity of local partners to enable them to carry out similar work in the future.

The expedition was led by RBG Kew working with colleagues from the Mozambique Agronomic Research Institute (IIAM), Birdlife International and the Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust (MMCT) in Malawi.

Outside the forest the country's roads and buildings have been badly affected by a civil war that lasted from the early 1980s to 1991, but inside scientists found the landscape was almost untouched. Ignorance of its existence, poor access and the forest's value as a refuge for villagers during the fighting had combined to protect it.

With local people returning to the area, and Mozambique's economy booming, there is a risk that this precious oasis of life will come under pressure as the area around is cleared to make space for crops.

Ends

To speak to Jonathan Timberlake or for more information please contact the RBG Kew press office, telephone 020 8332 5681 or e-mail pr@kew.org. Colleagues from the Mozambique

Agronomic Research Institute, Birdlife International and the Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust are also available for interview.

Images are available at www.kew.org/press/images/mount_mabu.html
Please contact the press office for the username and password

Notes to editors

Mount Mabu's Google Earth coordinates are 16 degrees 17 min, 56 secs south and 36 degrees 23 mins 44 secs east

Mount Mabu is also home to three bird species not known in the area previously:
Thyolo Alethe – globally threatened and seen in relatively high numbers in the Mabu forest
Namuli Apalis – Mozambique's only endemic species, previously known from only one mountain. The fact it has been spotted on Mabu is significant for conservation
Swynnerton's Robin – previously only known from three locations (Tanzania's east coast, Zimbabwe and central Mozambique)

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew is a world famous scientific organisation, internationally respected for its outstanding living collection of plants and world-class herbarium as well as its scientific expertise in plant diversity, conservation and sustainable development in the UK and around the world. Kew Gardens is a major international visitor attraction and its 132 hectares of landscaped gardens and its country garden, Wakehurst Place, attract nearly two million visitors every year. Kew was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2003 and celebrates its 250th anniversary in 2009. For further information please visit www.kew.org