



“SO YOU LIKE SUCCULENTS TOO?”

I first met Leslie Hill in July 1993, at the launch of the Institute for Plant Conservation (IPC) at the University of Cape Town. As the newly appointed Leslie Hill Professor of Plant Conservation, I was nervous. Together with a group of colleagues and postgraduate students, I had just returned from an exhilarating trip across South Africa's arid lands. Once again we had been overwhelmed by the enormous diversity of succulents in Namaqualand and had hatched all sorts of plans to research these intriguing plants. I was under the impression that Leslie's major concerns were the conservation of the Cape flora and the scourge of alien plants. I was at pains on how was I to tell Leslie that I wished to broaden the Cape flora concept to include the succulent Karoo (especially Namaqualand), and embark on a research programme to study the biodiversity and conservation of that region's plant life.

After ensuring that Leslie had a stiff gin and tonic, I led him from the bustling reception into my office. Almost apologetically, I said 'Mr Hill, I have a request. Would you mind if we at the IPC work outside the strict Cape Floristic Region, in places like Namaqualand?' I started babbling on about succulents, and how poorly the succulent Karoo was conserved, and so on. Leslie beamed at me, and indicating on the map on my wall, detailed with great enthusiasm the trips he and Harry Hall had undertaken to explore and collect the succulent flora of Namaqualand. This was the beginning of a friendship, bonded by a mutual love of succulents and a deep concern for their conservation.

Subsequently, Leslie and I spent many an evening on his porch, talking succulents, fronted by his magnificent collection of these endearing plants. His razor-sharp reminiscences of past plant-collecting forays touched me deeply. Why not plan some more trips? And so, towards the end of his octogenarian years, Leslie and I (invariably accompanied by Philip Desmet, Jan Vlok and other succulent enthusiasts) embarked on a series of field trips. We traveled to many corners of Namaqualand and the Little Karoo, sleeping in old barns and shabby hotels, pelted by rain and desiccated by berg winds. Despite the obvious hardships, Leslie never complained. His enthusiasm for locating the plants he knew and loved so much in the wild was infectious. We had fun.

And now he is gone. But what a legacy! His endowments have purchased for conservation some 100 000 ha of succulent Karoo veld, and were responsible for the establishment of the IPC, the molecular systematics laboratory at the Kirstenbosch Research Centre, and the Leslie Hill Conservatory at Kirstenbosch. But most of all, his patronage has fostered the creation of a new generation of succulent plant enthusiasts who have contributed enormously to our knowledge of the succulent Karoo flora. The baton has been passed. Bravo Leslie! Your memory shall endure.

Richard Cowling,

*Leslie Hill Professor of Plant Conservation and
Director: Institute for Plant Conservation: 1993-2000.*