

**Remarks Delivered by Greg Plunkett at the  
Launching of Chanel Sam Botanical Garden, Port Vila  
September 27, 2024**

Good morning! It's a great honor to be here among so many worthy guests — High Commissioners and Ambassadorial Staff, the Acting Prime Minister, Lady Mayor of Port Vila, Ministers, Directors General, and Directors of Vanuatu's Ministries and Departments, and so many other honored guests.

I'm Greg Plunkett, a Senior Research Scientist at the New York Botanical Garden — a botanical garden established over 130 years ago in New York City, which today attracts over 1 million visitors each year. **Today**, we are here to celebrate the official opening of a *new* botanical garden, just at the start of what we hope will also have a long and prosperous future, serving both the people of Vanuatu and its many visitors.

Botanical Gardens are “living museums” of plants, providing all who work in or visit them with a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the plant world, and the role that plants play in our lives and the life of our planet.

I am also here to represent the team of international partners, from the United States and elsewhere, who have been working with our Vanuatu team-mates at the Vanuatu Department of Forests and the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta, as well as local communities throughout the country, in a long-term project called “*Plants mo Pipol blong Vanuatu*”, which is now completing its 11th year. This project seeks to advance our knowledge and understanding of the plant world, especially here in Vanuatu.

Our work builds upon the foundation started by **M. Chanel Sam**, for whom this botanical garden is being named. During Sam's nearly 40-year career, he pioneered work on plant biodiversity in this country, setting the stage for the work we are doing today. For that, we owe a big “tankyu” to Sam!

When we first began, our “*Plants mo Pipol*” program goals were three-fold: To document ...

- all of Vanuatu's plants,
- how people use them, and
- the names of these plants in local languages.

These elements — plants, culture, and language — are essential to sustaining healthy environments and maintaining traditional lifestyles.

Since those early days of our work together, we have expanded to include important work to preserve threatened plant species and, most recently, to develop strategies for forest conservation that are firmly rooted in the traditional way of life here in Vanuatu (rather than using top-down models imported from the outside); we call this approach “*Kastom Forest Konsevesen*”.

After many years of starting this work, we've entered a phase recently where the work has begun to bear fruit. Just a few highlights include:

- Vanuatu's first modern checklist of all vascular plant species in the country, which currently includes 1,649 species of plants, of which just over 1,100 species are native, and 150 are unique (or “endemic”) in Vanuatu, being found no where else on Earth.

- We've also developed an "app" (or "computer application") that makes this checklist easier to access and understand — and we encourage the general public to use it!
- We've also collected data for and established "*Talking Dictionaries of Plant Names*" for 7 of Vanuatu's languages, helping to preserve this information, which is being rapidly lost. These 7 *Talking Dictionaries* are just a drop in the bucket when we consider that Vanuatu has 138 different languages — but it's an important start.
- Four years ago, we began work to preserve and enrich the few remnant populations of the Critically Endangered palm tree, known scientifically as *Carpoxylon macrospermum*. The last nation-wide survey of this species found only 37 adult trees left in the wild. Our work has supported communities to preserve and enrich this palm tree in its native habitats and locations — an approach call "in-situ" (or "in-place") conservation.
- As part of the same project, we added 26 endemic plant species to the IUCN Red List, which documents species at risk of extinction. We also added "Red List" status for all species on our Checklist app, making it a vital resource for stakeholders in need of such information.

The work you see all around you was influenced and informed by the "*Plants mo Pipol*" partnership. For example, many of the plants you see showcased in this Botanical Garden are native or endemic species here in Vanuatu, among which are many plant species that are threatened with extinction. And while "*Plants mo Pipol*" has focused on "in-situ" ("in-place") conservation, the Chanel Sam Botanical Garden will provide a refuge to protect threatened species outside of their native habitats (something called "ex-situ" or "out-of-place" conservation). The two approaches work hand-in-hand, supporting one another.

Lastly, this Botanical Garden will help to bring all of this knowledge to the general public, ranging from school groups and civic groups here in Vanuatu, to a wide range of visitors from other countries.

Before I end my remarks, I would like to express my appreciation, first to the **leadership of the Department of Forests**, who allowed and even encouraged the establishment and development of this Botanical Garden.

Next, I'd like to acknowledge the countless hours, days, and months that the **whole team at the Forestry Department's Botany & Conservation Unit** gave to building this Botanical Garden. Their dedication and hard work are evident everywhere here. And chief among these people is **Mr. Presley Dovo**, Senior Officer for this unit, whose success in implementing the very idea of a botanical garden is a testimony to his great vision and leadership.

All gardens (including botanical gardens) must be tended — weeded, watered, cleaned, and so forth. In other words, they must be supported and nourished. I hope all of you here today will join us in tending this beautiful garden! Thank you.