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**Benedikt Roezl (1824-1885): Hero or Villain?
A reflection on orchid collecting vs. orchid conservation**

Benedikt Roezl traveled widely across Northern, Central and South America from 1853 to 1874. Applauded by European orchid growers as the most successful orchid collector of his time, and honored after his death with what probably is the only statue in the world devoted to a man admiring an orchid, his activities would have horrified conservationists today. It is believed that Roezl sent approximately one million plants to Europe, about two thirds of them orchids. When Roezl first came to Mexico, he established himself in the neighborhood of Veracruz. The damage caused to nature by the plant hunters of the 19. century was such that Carl A. Purpus, who collected in the same area fifty years later, complained: “...a good many German and Belgian collectors have been here; I would have found more plants if it was not for that.” And Roezl himself had to admit the disaster that he and his accomplices were causing; in a letter from February 10, 1873, Roezl wrote from Caracas: “... the first thing I did was to ask for the ‘Flor de Mayo’... , as they call here *Cattleya mossiae*... The answers were negative. I was told that it was extinguished in the neighborhood of La Guaira, as a result of the massive exports to Europe...”

The history of modern orchidology begins after World War I. Since that time, in a period of just 90 years, hundreds of thousands of orchids have been collected from the forests of the world’s tropics, the great majority to be pressed into herbarium specimens. What was done in the 19. century in the name of ‘Orchidomania’ is not all too far from what is done today in the name of science. A fair percentage of these collections has been the responsibility of those attending the III International Orchid Conservation Congress. A code of ethics for scientific orchid collecting is suggested, together with an invitation to expand the collection of living plants for cultivation and research in Botanical gardens.