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American Biologists Visiting Cuba to Study Orchids

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MIAMI, FL - MARCH 16: The endangered Mule ear orchid is seen reintroduced to an area of the Everglades National Park after it had disappeared due to years of poaching on March 16, 2015 in Miami, Florida. The Institute for Regional Conservation released a 10-year report authored by George D. Gann, chief conservation strategist for the group, that included information on 59 rare and endangered plants, many of which used to flourish in South Florida and now are barely clinging to existence in the Everglades and nearby protected areas. The report provides park managers recommendations on habitat management in the face of potential impacts of sea level rise, invasive exotic species and other threats to the health of the ecosystem. (Photo : Joe Raedle/Getty Images)

American biologists are also taking advantage of the restored diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba to study plants and animals. One of the ongoing programs is the preservation of different orchid species found in Cuba that used to be present in Florida.

According to [The News-Press](#), members of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Florida Fish and Wildlife Service are working with several Cuban botanists to help gather seeds of these orchids and be sent back to the U.S. From there, the orchid seeds will be grown

inside a laboratory before the adult plants are transferred in the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve Park, where they will repopulate naturally.

Many botanical experts are calling the 85,000-acre park in Collier County, Florida the orchid capital of America because it is home to about 120 species of orchids. It used to have a great number of orchid populations, but poaching and urbanization caused some of the species to be extinct.

"They are committed to working with us, so it's just a matter of finding plants that have seed capsules. We've gotten seed capsules from three of the four, but only two of them have grown in the lab," Dennis Giardina of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Service said.

Illinois College also signed a collaboration agreement with two Cuban institutions last week after a successful research trip in Guanahacabibes National Park earlier this month about rare ghost orchids and vampire and pallid bats, per the school's [official website](#). The University of Pinar del Rio and the Soroa Botanical Garden are known for their research on orchids and bats.

"This is an exciting time for Illinois College. This collaboration with these two highly regarded academic institutions in Cuba will provide a unique cultural and learning experience for our students," school President Barbara Farley said.

"Our goal is to give IC students the opportunity to conduct research in Cuba as well as work with Cuban researchers here in the United States. Specifically, this endeavor will start by giving faculty and students from the biology department an opportunity to work with Cuban counterpart," Illinois College's Professor of Modern Languages Steven Gardner added.

The talks of a research collaboration started when Biology professor and orchid expert Lawrence Zettler met Cuban orchid specialist Ernesto Mújica at a conference in Ecuador back in 2012. Zettler is proud that Illinois College is the first academic institution to form an agreement with Cuba and added that many more American colleges and universities will soon follow their footsteps.

Tags[U.S.-Cuba Relations](#), [orchids](#), [Illinois College](#), [Florida](#), [Florida Department of Environmental Protection](#), [Florida Fish and Wildlife Service](#), [biology](#), [Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve Park](#)