



# THE INTERNATIONAL PALM SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

## A Virtual Tour of Rodrigues Island by Andy Hurwitz

**Our final stop on the Mascarene Islands post biennial tour is Rodrigues Island.**

Rodrigues Island, part of the independent republic of Mauritius, is 110 km<sup>2</sup> and characterized by a gently sloping terrain with a maximal elevation of only 390 m.

Sadly, deforestation is common throughout the archipelago. Reunion's steep vertical challenges are clearly protective, mitigating against human encroachment. Consequently, Reunion is still covered by natural vegetation on 40% of the island. While Mauritius, older, flatter and much more densely populated has less than 5% of its original forest and, regrettably, Rodrigues retains only 1% of its native, natural vegetation. There are three protected regions on Rodrigues with surviving remnants of natural vegetation, comprising only 3.58 km<sup>2</sup>. Two of these are actually small islands and one, Grande Montagne Nature Reserve, is located on the mainland. Here we find the sparse native habitat restricted to hilltops and steep river canyons.

I was fortunate to establish a dialogue with Reshad Jhangeer-Khan, the Rodrigues Manager for the non-governmental Mauritian Wildlife Foundation (MWF). Reshad, along with Vikash Tatayah whom we met in the last newsletter, kindly provided these photographs.

The Grande Montagne Nature Reserve occupies 25.5-ha at the highest elevation (350m) on the island. Since 1994, the MWF has been tasked with restoration of this preserve. Thus far nearly 200,000 seedlings, representing 43 endemic species, have been planted. This includes *Latania verschaffeltii*, *Hyophorbe verschaffeltii* and *Dictyosperma album* var. *aureum*.

*Latania verschaffeltii*, at Anse Quitor Nature Reserve (34 ha, established in 1996), Rodrigues Island (photos courtesy of Reshad Jhangeer-Khan, MWF). Note somewhat lax leaflets.



## A Virtual Tour of Rodrigues

*Latania verschaffeltii* is a striking palm endemic only to Rodrigues Island. This is considered the yellow latan palm (yellow color of the petioles, especially on young plants); distinguishing it from the red form (*L. lontaroides*), we visited on Reunion and the blue form (*L. loddigesii*), endemic to the Mauritius main island. Yellow, red, and blue! Additionally, the costapalmate leaf of *L. verschaffeltii* is less stiff and a bit more droopy than the other members of the genus.

*Latania verschaffeltii*, fruiting female. All *Latania* species are dioecious, meaning that male and female flowers are borne on separate plants.



The spindle palm, *Hyophorbe verschaffeltii*, gets its common name from the shape of the trunk (in distinction from the bottle palm, *Hyophorbe lagenicaulis*, seen on Round Island in our August newsletter). The spindle palm is critically endangered with fewer than 50 individuals remaining in the wild. However its unique shape and lovely gray-green crown shaft have thankfully prompted ubiquitous use in cultivation. Clearly this is a unique palm and it would have been thrilling to experience them in habitat.

*Latania verschaffeltii*, young specimen. The yellow hue of the petioles is still visible .

## A Virtual Tour of Rodrigues



*Latania verschaffeltii* in habitat, Grande Montagne Nature Reserve, Rodrigues. Note the steep riverine canyon characteristic of the small swathes of preserved forest on the island. (photo by Gabby Salazar)

*Hyophorbe verschaffeltii*, Inflorescence and seed, Grande Montagne Nature Reserve (Photo by Vikash Tatayah, MWF). By the way, the epithet *verschaffeltii* (and those darn double f's) honors Ambroise Colette Alexandre Verschaffelt, a 19th century horticulturalist, illustrator and author from Ghent, Belgium.



## A Virtual Tour of Rodrigues



*Dictyosperma album* var. *aureum*  
(Hurricane Palm)

This solitary ringed trunk palm is critically endangered (again!). The *aureum* variety is seen only on Rodrigues, as opposed to *album* var *album* (occasionally referred to as the princess palm) that we saw in Reunion/Mauritius and variety *conjugatum* (one individual on Round Island). The *aureum* variety is characterized by a thin trunk, with yellow coloration of the crown shaft and petioles. Careful observation shows young leaves to exhibit a light brown, almost orange color.

Although we rely exclusively on scientific names, on occasion, a common name might be particularly valid. The hurricane palm is one such example, as was witnessed after hurricane Andrew in 1992 (on your editor's birthday no less), which leveled nearly every tree in its path through Homestead, Florida. Apparently all that remained were the *Dictyosperma* still proudly standing

*Dictyosperma album* var. *aureum* (Hurricane Palm), photo by Reshad Jhangeer-Khan, MWF.

I continue to be awestruck by the remarkable reforestation efforts being made by the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation. Both *in-situ* and *ex-situ* strategies seem to be working. Unfortunately, the MWF is now overwhelmed with an environmental disaster, the *Wakashio* oil spill, responsible for dumping 1,000 metric tons of oil onto the coral reef near the southeast coast of Mauritius.

On a happier note, and given our strong conservationist leanings, I was particularly delighted to learn that because of sustained reforestation on Rodrigues Island, the endemic birds have returned to nesting in *Lantania verschaaffeltii*. And with that indelible image, we will conclude our virtual biennial tour.

## A Virtual Tour of Rodrigues

Exotic and colorful (yellow, red, blue, white, and of course green), the palms of the Mascarene Archipelago are prized as ornamentals around the world, especially in Mauritius. (all cultivation photos by Andy Hurwitz)



*Dictyosperma album* with Les Quatre Bandes, the Mauritian national flag.

At a distance of nearly 18,500 km, Mauritius represents the farthest populated land from where I live in Los Angeles. Palm-nuts like us are always trying to recreate these Shangri-La's in our own backyard garden or greenhouse, using exotic palms. I am fortunate to be able to visit Mascarene Island endemic palms in cultivation, right in my own neighborhood (unsurprisingly at other IPS member gardens). These remind me of a very memorable time that we spent in Mauritius.

Trunk and inflorescence,  
*Hyophorbe verschaffeltii*



## A Virtual Tour of Rodrigues

*Latania lontaroides* in coastal Southern California. IPS member Bill Sandford (BS Man about Palms for all of you “Palmtalkers”) for scale.



## Next month: An unusual occurrence in Kent



While this is not so unusual for California or Florida, it doesn't happen often in England...

(Photo by Vic Silver)

## New Lifetime Members

On behalf of our 100% volunteer Board of Directors, I would like to recognize and thank our newest lifetime members of the IPS:

**George Nottingham**  
**Lyn Crehan**

Our mission to preserve palms in habitat requires like-minded plant conservationists like you! Please consider supporting our society by encouraging new memberships with fellow palm and tropical plant enthusiasts.



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