

The Mystery Sabal of Anegada

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The first botanical expedition to Anegada was in 1913 when two palms were reported, *Thrinax Morrisii* and an unknown *Sabal*. Until recently, there has been no further botanical investigation of the island and the unknown *Sabal* has taken on the mystique of an undescribed endemic. In fact, the island Anegada itself has a certain mystique. For those who have heard it, the name conjures up notions of a Caribbean desert beyond the horizon which is better left unexplored.

Anegada is the northeasternmost of the Virgin Islands, and unlike the other hilly or mountainous islands in the region, it is flat. With only a few dozen families who live by fishing and gifts from absentee children, there is little to draw the tourist or commercial traveler, nor apparently, the botanist. Threats of modern development have not so far been fulfilled, and for the time being, the vegetation is in much the same state as it has been for the past one or two hundred years. This tranquility is now near an end for there are plans for "developing" the island into a large and modern retirement colony.

In the words of the palm's discoverer: "A species of *Sabal* inhabits the sandy plain, West End, Anegada; neither flowers nor fruit have been obtained and the species remains undetermined. It has the appearance there of being indigenous." (Britton & Wilson, Scientific Survey of Porto Rico and the Virgin Islands 5: 116, 1923).

In August of 1970 and again in February 1971, I made the hike to the west end of Anegada and saw both the *Sabal* and the *Thrinax*. Herbarium specimens

of the first have now been identified and turned out to be *Sabal causiaram* (Cook) Beccari, a species from Puerto Rico and known in tropical gardens. It is not, after all, a new species as some botanists have speculated. Specimens were taken of the *Thrinax*, and they are indeed *Thrinax Morrisii* Wendl., a species first reported from Anguilla in the next island group to the south. A third palm seen scattered around the island in small numbers is the coconut.

There are three different sites for *Sabal causiaram* at the west end of Anegada, each separated by about half a mile. The central site may be spotted from afar by an emergent tree above the 8-12-foot scrub (see illustration). This tree has two much smaller plants beside it, indicating that the species is reproducing itself there. Residents of the island say that this tree has been there as long as they remember, and it is probably what N. L. Britton saw when he visited the island with W. C. Fishlock in 1913. Steps have been cut into the trunk to allow a climber to see above the scrub, so this tree seems to have served as a lookout post. Perhaps it was used for sighting buccaneers to hide from or wrecks to plunder in an era when the seas were regulated in different ways from now.

Sabal causiaram has not been reported in the wild from the Virgin Islands, but the Anegada trees are only about eighty miles from Puerto Rico where it was believed to be endemic. These trees are now situated well away from human influence, but one cannot say for certain that they were not planted. Knowledge of the vegetation of Anegada before the woods were sold off as charcoal a hun-



The lookout *Sabal* of Anegada. One of the footholds cut in its side can be made out at the arrow.

dred and fifty years ago would help answer the question. In any case, they are an interesting extension to the known range of the species.

Thrinax Morrisii, or "broom tire" as it is called locally, does not now much exceed four feet in height on Anegada, although Britton mentions reports of twenty-foot trees. It may be that the natives whom Britton referred to actually had in mind the sabals as trees of this height. Plants to be seen at present are growing in long swale-like depressions in the sand near the west end, and their tops do not rise above the scrub. They appear to require this little bit of shelter from the severe winds and occasional salt spray that gusts across the flat coral island. Although it is a long walk from

the settlement, inhabitants of the island use fronds of these dainty palms for making brooms. In spite of their diminutive appearance, they seem to be in very good health and several were flowering and fruiting abundantly in February.

Both the *Sabal* and the *Thrinax* are unusual natural items for the Virgin Islands, and it would be a noteworthy bit of foresight if the government of the islands set aside the small area of the sabals as a preserve. Except for the need of the present inhabitants of a source of broom thatching, the *Thrinax* should be legally protected too, as these palms will certainly become targets for vandalism as soon as projected development introduces a number of new residents from other areas.

First International Congress of Systematic and Evolutionary Biology

The Society of Systematic Zoology and the International Association for Plant Taxonomy have joined forces to develop this first opportunity for botanical/zoological interaction at the international level. The University of Colorado (Boulder, Colorado) has extended a gracious invitation to meet on that campus August 4-11, 1973. The diversity of ecological situations in the surrounding countryside makes this one of the most attractive sites in North America, both aesthetically and scientifically. The presence of experienced, enthusiastic biologists on that campus also provides an indispensable ingredient for the success of this Congress.

Program plans at this point encompass interdisciplinary symposia and contributed paper sessions. The botanists will not convene a nomenclatural section but a zoological one on this subject is anticipated. In the next few months the outline of the program and other activities will begin to take form. All suggestions will be gratefully received, carefully considered, and as many adopted as practical or feasible. Correspondence may be addressed to the Secretary: Dr. James L. Reveal, Department of Botany, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20740.

PALM LITERATURE

The Stechert-Hafner Service Agency, Inc., 866 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022, has announced two works on palms for subscription, one a revision, the other a reprint of a classic study. Subscription requests for the following may be sent direct to the agency.

GLASSMAN, SIDNEY F. A Revision of B. E. Dahlgren's Index of Ameri-

can Palms, about 300-400 pages, royal octavo. Subscription price \$27.50, after publication \$33.00.

MARTIUS, CARL F. P. von. *Historia Naturalis Palmarum*, 3 vols., Leipzig 1823-50. Reprint in 2 vols., text and tables. Subscription price \$110.00, after publication \$137.50.