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Gronophyllum procerum, People and Places, Pictured in their Stone Age Habitat

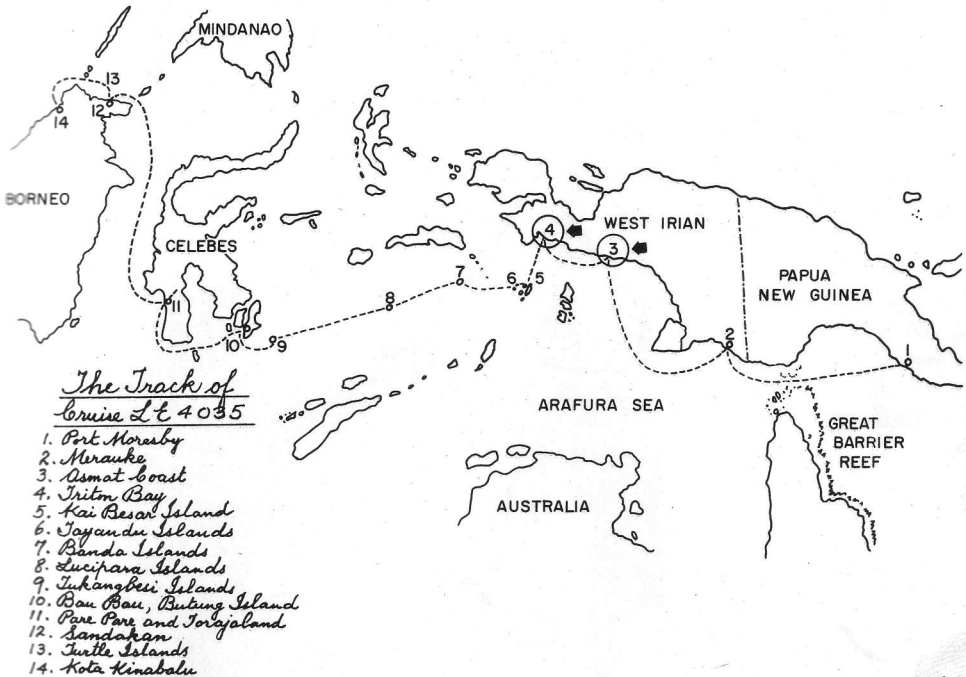
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This brief pictorial article is devoted to one palm. Few palm enthusiasts have seen the species. Yet there are thousands of the trees growing naturally, indeed flourishing, in a remote, largely inaccessible area along the west coast of Irian Jaya, Indonesian New Guinea. Detailed maps of the area are non-existent, especially any which might pinpoint small native villages or rivers leading to them. But we have

duplicated a sketch drawing (Fig. 1) which may be helpful.

Approximately a century ago there was an intrepid naturalist and explorer, Alfred Russel Wallace, who set sail from England. He was a compatriot of Charles Darwin, to whom he dedicated his early book, *The Malay Archipelago*, first edition circa 1870, a later edition 1890, and now, in paperback, published by Dover Publica-



1. From *The Log Of The M. S. Lindblad Explorer Expedition Through The Spice Islands*; Port Moresby, New Guinea, to Kota Kinabalu, Borneo, March-April 1984. The dotted line indicates track of the cruise, some 4,000 miles. (Dennis Puleston, Naturalist, Lecturer, and Artist, who made the Log available has our heart-felt appreciation.)



2. Asmat men sculled rapidly down river from their village in dugout war canoes and on out to sea to greet our intrusion into their domain—rarely disturbed by outsiders. The man seated was a chief and “coxswain” of his vessel. Canoes swarmed around us, many of the “warriors” transferred themselves to our zodiacs, and we went on, towing their abandoned canoes.



3. The closer they came, the more one wondered what might befall an unwary, perhaps unwelcome, unescorted palm hunter, especially one still at sea without linguistic ability to explain his mission!



4. The village, fronted by a phalanx of young greeters, was situated on the only small area we saw above swamp level. The whole place became a spongy morass after a sudden rain shower drenched everything just after our up-river landing there. The inhabitants still indulge in "head-hunting" forays among the tribes; happily, our group left with all heads in place. Native vendors had some skulls for sale, primitive art carvings, and objects made from leg bones of the indigenous, beautifully-plumed Cassowary bird. Sometime in the past the Asmats were nomadic, moving in quest of sago palms as a food source. The beetle (weevil) larvae of *Rhynchophorus cruentatus*, found on some of these palms appears to have been their "gourmet" food. These people obviously had cultivated coconuts (a large-trunk species that appears in the background) as well as sago palms.

tions, Inc., New York. In our judgment, Alfred Russel Wallace may not have been given sufficient appreciation for his explorations, meticulous descriptions and contributions to our knowledge about this area of the world stretching over the vast expanse of the far-west Pacific Ocean, embracing more than 13,000 islands and in distance perhaps 5,000 miles. Today, the area remains essentially faithful to his early descriptions and observations.

Mr. Wallace refers to "lofty palms" in the forests, and even describes in detail how the natives make palm sugar and wine. But of course he didn't know the names of all the palm genera and species that he must have seen during his eight years in the area.

We sailed from Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea on the Lindblad Explorer, late afternoon 30 March 1984. Generally the ship followed, with some navigation through treacherous waters, the route

along the dotted line in the map (Fig. 1). We were at sea through 31 March, the 1st and 2nd of April, sailing nearly 1,000 miles.

Before dawn on the 3rd, the ship anchored some six miles from shore off the Asmat coast of Irian Jaya (see No. 3 on map). In the murky, shallow waters a zodiac (rubber raft) was off-loaded from the Explorer in the darkness, and our cruise leader went ashore near the mouth of the Ewta River, up which was located the village of Pirian. Despite already having been cleared by Indonesian immigration, it was essential to get permission to land from local villagers. After being assured a friendly welcome, we set out in zodiacs for the two-hour trip to shore, acquiring a bit of sunburn as we went in. Approaching the river's mouth, we were met and surrounded by an armada of dug-out war canoes filled with dark, slender figures with painted faces and bodies, and



5. There is no easy access to the West Coast of Irian Jaya. We did it, of course by small ship, off-loading on zodiacs to go ashore through shallow waters. From the Asmat area we sailed on to Triton Bay, a name seldom found on maps of the area. With the ship remaining well off-shore, our zodiacs went into the Bay via entrances camouflaged by small limestone islets. Your author and Phyllis got into this picture (not planned). The man at the tiller, Tom Ritchie, led our expedition and is a member of the Palm Society.

adorned with feathered regalia, sculling with long-handled paddles. It was a startling, if not frightening sight (Figs. 2 and 3). Proceeding up the narrow, tea-colored river, we left the mangrove trees of the swampy coast for jungle-lined, still, swampy banks, beyond which we saw an occasional large *Caryota*, *Metroxylon*, and a few coconuts. We believed there were some rattans, but otherwise as far as our limited opportunity to explore permitted, we saw no additional palms. As we approached the village, most of the younger inhabitants lined up en masse to forefront the coconuts which were under cultivation (Fig. 4). Incidentally, this Asmat area is where the late Michael Rockefeller disappeared while on an expedition pur-

suing his heartfelt devotion to archaeology and primitive art.

Back on board the Explorer, we sailed overnight approximately 300 miles up the coast to Triton Bay, which Mr. Wallace's map of 1868 places at approximately 134° longitude and 4° latitude. The scope of this extremely scenic area is not apparent from the bay's entrance, as the Bay itself encloses dozens of small, upthrust, limestone islets, most of which are eroded at the waterline to form mushroom-like shapes. These islands are densely vegetated almost exclusively with one palm species. Dr. John Dransfield has suggested this is most probably *Gronophyllum procerum*, first collected by Zippelius in 1828, described by Blume in 1843 and probably



6. Inside the Bay, large and small islands protruded out of clear waters as far around as the eye could see, most of them eroded at the waterline to form odd-shaped, toadstool-like creations. They were completely overgrown with *Gronophyllum procerum*, which exhibited such enthusiasm for its habitat that little room remained for other plants.

only very rarely collected since. Many things were astonishing about this unusual and beautiful hidden Shangri-la, Triton Bay. Its mysterious expanses stretched on, beckoning beyond each island which we circumnavigated in the zodiacs. It seemed like another world, and to imagine such a dense population of a single palm covering every islet to the almost total exclusion of other trees, was incredible! These limestone mushrooms in such a remote location probably have more mature palms growing per acre than any other palm area we know. Though we couldn't climb the steep cliffs, nor scramble over the myriad islands in the Bay to look for others, and though *Gronophyllum procerum* predominates, it is highly probable that other palms are waiting there to be found.

Pictures, of course, speak louder than words. What follows expands our vision of this relatively unexplored and exciting area, where one of our infrequently seen palms has been hiding and thriving.

The pictures (Figs. 2-11) have detailed legends that supplement our story.

Exploring the many islets and interesting formations in Triton Bay we found various plants though none of them came close to competing with the palms. But frequently we saw individual specimens of a lovely cycad, despite the preponderance of palms. Reluctantly, our zodiac wove around and out of the unique formations to one of the Bay's entrances, and on back to our ship, thence on to another leg of our journey through the Spice Islands. We exited the Bay through a larger entrance



7. One of the few signs of habitation visible inside the Bay was this half-finished shack, though no natives were in sight. Of more interest, the palm in back of the shack was probably cultivated.



8. One can look from inside the Bay outward through narrow entrances to the open Arafura Sea. Exploring inside the Bay soon involved us in such a labyrinth that we wondered if our experienced leader was a good enough navigator to get out of the maze. See the palms silhouetted.



9. This picture enhances description of how much *Gronophyllum procerum* dominates the area. One really must see it with his own eyes to absorb the beauty of it all.



10. The only population we encountered during some two hours cruising the Bay first loomed up in the form of a lone fisherman paddling a very crudely constructed outrigger dugout canoe. He was wary of us, as we were of him, and any verbal communication was of little avail since there was an uncrossable language barrier.



11. More of the beauty of the seemingly endless palm, *Gronophyllum procerum*, which covers the islets that dot Triton Bay.

than the one we entered. Near the exit we paused to admire some of the peculiarities of the plant life, such as a lovely species of *Nepenthes* (pitcher plant), climbing and clinging to the limestone as

well as to palm roots populating the islets. Perhaps one day someone will get to this area at a time when *Gronophyllum procerum* is fruiting, and will honor the Palm Society Seed Bank with the gleanings.