

The Common Name of *Washingtonia filifera*

JAMES W. CORNETT

Palm Springs Desert Museum, 101 Museum Drive, Palm Springs, CA 92263

Stability and universality are two excellent reasons for the use of scientific names. However, there seems a persistent disdain for the use of scientific nomenclature on the part of the lay public. The result has been that common names have flourished and a barrier restricting the flow of information from professionals to lay persons (and vice versa) has been erected. (Ornithologists have largely solved the problem by standardizing common names for birds.) With these considerations in mind, I wish to propose that the palm *Washingtonia filifera* be given a standardized common name.

Although restricted in its natural (or naturalized) distribution to the Sonoran Desert of southeastern California, western Arizona, extreme southern Nevada, and northeastern Baja California (Fig. 1), it is planted in many parts of the world as an ornamental (Parish 1907, Moran 1977, Blombery and Rodd 1982). Not surprisingly, numerous common names have been used for this species, many of which are confusing or misleading.

Major W. W. Emory discovered, in 1846, what later was to become known to the botanical community as *W. filifera* (Parish 1907). On seeing the palms, members of his exploration party familiar with Florida called them "cabbage trees." Today, the most frequent common name applied to *W. filifera* is "California fan palm" (Vogl and McHargue 1966, Sunset Editors 1979, Peterson 1966). But the name suggests that the palm is restricted to California and, as has already been

mentioned, it is found in Nevada, Arizona, and Baja California as well as California. In truth there are nearly as many individuals of *W. filifera* outside of California than within it (Henderson 1961).

Another common name which has made for difficulties is Washington palm (Hanson and Churchill 1961) or Washington fan palm (Kasbeer 1971). Although there are advantages in using the generic name as part of the common name, there are two species in the genus *Washingtonia*, and Washington fan palm could refer to either *W. filifera* or its slender cousin, *W. robusta*, of central Baja California. Jaeger (1941) used the name "desert palm" and, although this is appropriate and not misleading, it is sometimes used to designate *Livistona mariae* of the Australian desert.

Few names are without fault, but I proposed that the common name of *W. filifera* be "desert fan palm." With just one exception (Moran 1979), "desert" describes the climate of its habitat and "fan" describes the shape of its leaf and assigns it to a taxonomic grouping (Moore 1973). "Fan" used in the common name also separates *W. filifera* from the date palm, *Phoenix dactylifera*, which occasionally occurs as an introduced species in desert fan palm oases.

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1. Desert fan palms in the Coachella Valley, California. Photo by Stephen Willard.

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