



53. Habitats of *Jubaeopsis caffra*. Above, mouth of the Umsikaba River; below, mouth of the Umtentu River, both in Pondoland. Photographs by R. Story.

The Pondoland Palm

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When Dr. Hodge asked me to write a short article on *Jubaeopsis caffra* for the journal PRINCIPES I thought it best to see first what the author (Beccari) had said about it in his original paper. Apart from the formal Latin description, Beccari wrote in Italian. My war-time vocabulary took me part of the way and the rest of the translation was done with the help of a young lady from the Italian Legation in Pretoria who coped with all the words except *spata*, which defeated us both (but I realized later it probably meant *spathe*). Beccari points out that this palm is closely related to *Jubaea spectabilis* [*J. chilensis*], a monotypic genus from Chile, so much so that it could be considered a second species of *Jubaea*. It differs in having sessile male flowers and free sepals and is (or at least was when he wrote his paper in 1913) the nearest known relative of the coconut. Its fruit is built on the same general lines, with a large hollow in the middle, and the male flowers have the same type of calyx formed from three imbricate segments. In Marloth's *Flora* it is stated that the nut is without milk, but this is a mistake—it does contain milk, just like the coconut. The nut is, however, much smaller, about an inch and a half in diameter, and the germinating holes also are different, not situated at the bottom as in the coconut but equatorially.

Beccari's specimens were sent to him by Sir David Prain, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and "had been collected by Mr. Charles Ross (1909) along the rivers Umukaba and Mtentu in Pondoland (South Africa) from where later other examples were also sent to Kew by Dr. Marloth. 'Inkomba' is the Native name of *Jubaeopsis*." There are two points of interest in

this quotation. Firstly Beccari is mistaken in giving the name of the river as Umukaba, it is Umsikaba (with the stress on the second syllable). We may as well get both names correct while we are about it—while it is permissible to leave out the first letter of the prefix, one should be consistent and call the rivers either Umtentu and Umsikaba or Mtentu and Msikaba). Secondly Ross's collection was evidently not the first, for T. R. Sim, in his work published in 1907, speaks of *Hyphaene crinita* and then goes on to say "This or another Palm occurs on the Egossa coast in East Pondoland; specimens sent me from there by Forester Campbell have fruits answering the above description and 1½ inches diam., but the leaves were said to be pinnate. He gives the Native name as *Inkomba*, and states that the leaf is fully 6 feet long, panicle about 5 feet long, each branch has about 40 twigs thickly clustered with fruits which are apt to drop off, and that it only occurs, as far as he knows, at one place on the Egossa coast." Ross, incidentally, was also a member of the staff of the Department of Forestry. He was then Conservator of Forests in that area.

There is one more observation of Beccari's worth quoting: "I am almost sure that figure 164 in *Historia Naturalis Palmarum* of Martius, which is supposed to show *Phoenix reclinata*, shows instead the habit of *Jubaeopsis caffra*. It is easy to see that the said figure has nothing that could make it resemble a *Phoenix*, and much less *Phoenix reclinata*. It represents instead a medium-sized palm with a short trunk covered by the bases of the leaves, which are large, rigid, gracefully arched and have a short stalk; the spadices appear exactly as in a typical *Coccoloba*, have



54. *Jubaeopsis caffra*. Photograph by L. E. W. Codd.

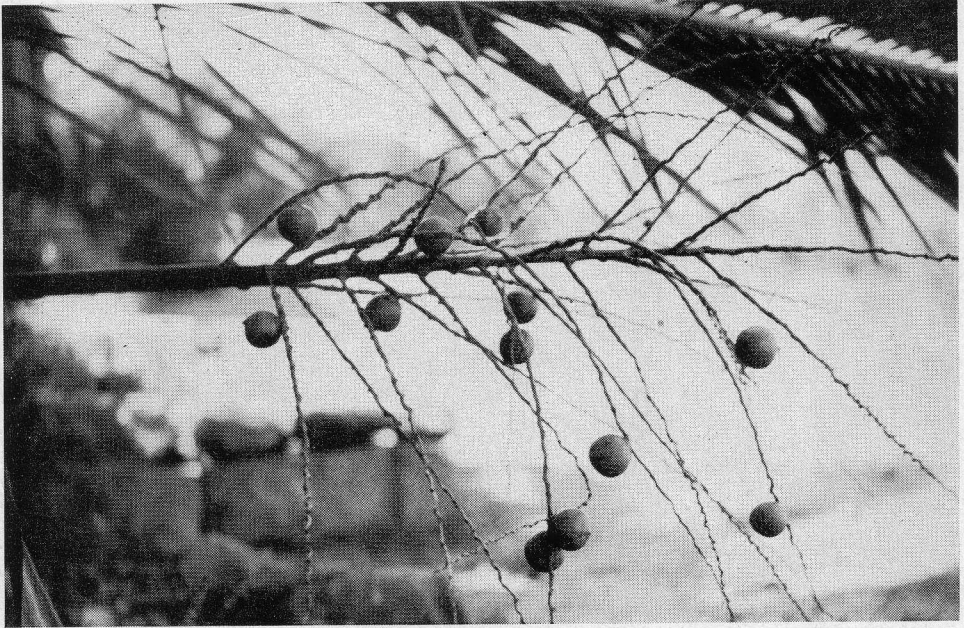


55. *Phoenix reclinata* at Letaba, Kruger National Park, South Africa. Photograph by W. H. Hodge.

an internal cymbiform-fusiform spathe, and a simply-branching panicle bearing round fruits. Martius writes that this plate was done by Ecklon on the hills near the Fish River (33°30' south latitude), that is to say in a region a little further south than Pondoland." I cannot agree with Beccari's conclusions. Mr. W. Marais has examined the figure in question at Kew and finds that it is a habit sketch on quite a small scale with the fruits mere blobs, some round and some more or less ovate, and although they are too big for *Phoenix reclinata* the plate is out in perspective and far too poor to warrant Beccari's assumption. In addition, *Phoenix reclinata* and *Jubaeopsis* are extremely alike vegetatively. I know this from my own experience, for I am familiar with *Phoenix reclinata* in the field and yet mistook *Jubaeopsis* for it. I remember at the time absently wondering why the rachis was such a deep gold instead of the usual nondescript pale yellow, and I should never have realised I was looking at *Jubaeopsis* if it had not been for some broken nuts on a flat stone near by, evidently broken open by the native herdboys for the sweet edible flesh inside. The palms are protected but they grow in native territory miles away from authority and I doubt if the local small boys have any idea of their status anyway. The two river mouths where they are found are about eight miles apart, the rivers flowing between rocky thickly wooded banks in rolling grassy country. The northern one, the Mtentu, is reached over a rather rough track which (getting fainter and fainter as it goes) winds past scattered native huts and small herds of cattle and sheep and finally runs down a steep rocky slope to peter out on the river bank, and right there is the first *Jubaeopsis*, the same one that I mistook for a *Phoenix*, in a most attractive spot, sheltered, deserted

and quiet except for the noise of the surf on the beach below. The palms at the mouth of the Msikaba River to the south fall within the Mkambati Leper Institution, which is beautifully situated on a headland overlooking a rather wider and deeper valley and the sea. No one may enter Mkambati without a permit and in consequence it is one of the few places in the native territories where the vegetation has not been profoundly disturbed and the wild animals have not been exterminated. It is a valuable and interesting place scientifically and those who have the interests of wild life at heart (that is to say very few) will find it hard to suppress a sneaking sympathy with a certain highly-placed official of the South African Department of Agriculture who was heard to make the following tactless remark: "Unfortunately they have advanced so much in their treatment of leprosy that there is a danger that Mkambati may close down!" The palms, as far as we know, are restricted to an extremely limited area—a few on the outskirts of the riverine bush and the remainder on rocky shelving banks near the water, forming small thickets, sometimes stemless and at other times with stems about six feet high. They may be elsewhere as well, for this is an out-of-the-way place and is little known botanically.

The one big snag as far as I am concerned in botanising along this lovely stretch of coast is that it is the home of a swift and deadly snake known as the black mamba. Although it is doubtful whether this snake would attack without being molested, the risk is that in making straight for its lair, as it invariably does when alarmed, it will bite anyone in its way. Weight for weight its venom is a little less potent than that of the Cape cobra but quicker in taking effect, and this together with its size and vigour makes it greatly feared. According to



56. Fruits of *Jubaeopsis caffra*. Photograph by L. E. W. Codd.

the *Guide to the Albany Museum* there are in this area "tracts of land quite unoccupied by the Natives on account of mambas." The mamba is nearly at its southern limit here—it has not been recorded south of the Mbotyi River about seventeen miles from Mkambati. This is puzzling, for the coastal strip is frost-free for hundreds of miles further south and, one would think, better suited to the mamba than many parts of the Transvaal where it is found in areas that are subject to heavy winter frosts. However, I suppose this is no more puzzling than the distribution of *Jubaeopsis*. At least it has been established that the mamba will not live at Port Elizabeth, but there appears to be no reason at all why *Jubaeopsis* should stop short where it does because there is a thriving specimen growing in the open in St. George's Park at Port Elizabeth (Cook, 1950). In Natal it has been grown from seed by Mr. D. E. Mitchell of Margate, and seed from Mr. Mitchell's

palm has in turn produced seedlings. We have also germinated several nuts in Pretoria and have sent some over to Dr. Hodge to try, in the hope that he will have every success in establishing it near what is generally held to be its ancestral home.

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